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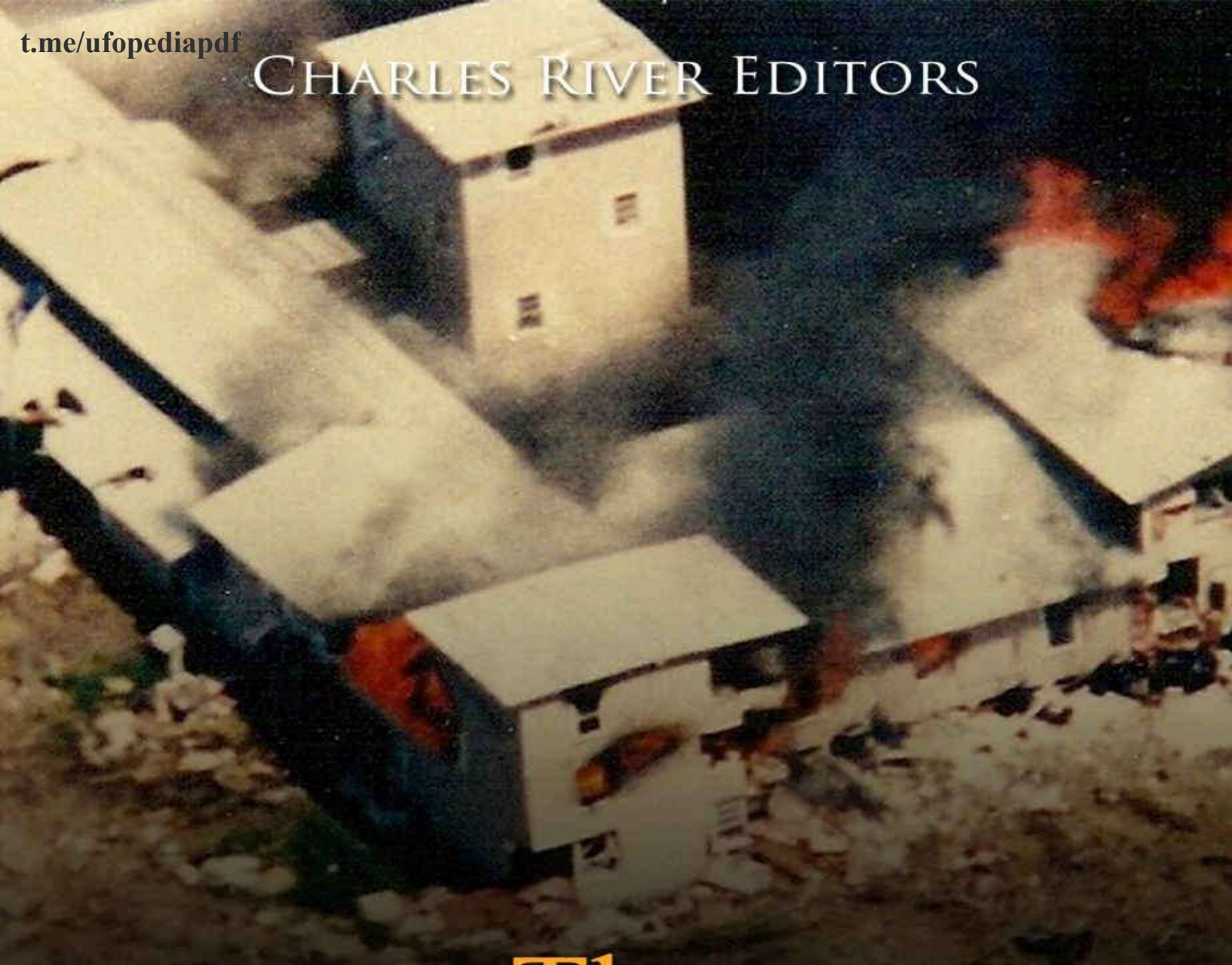
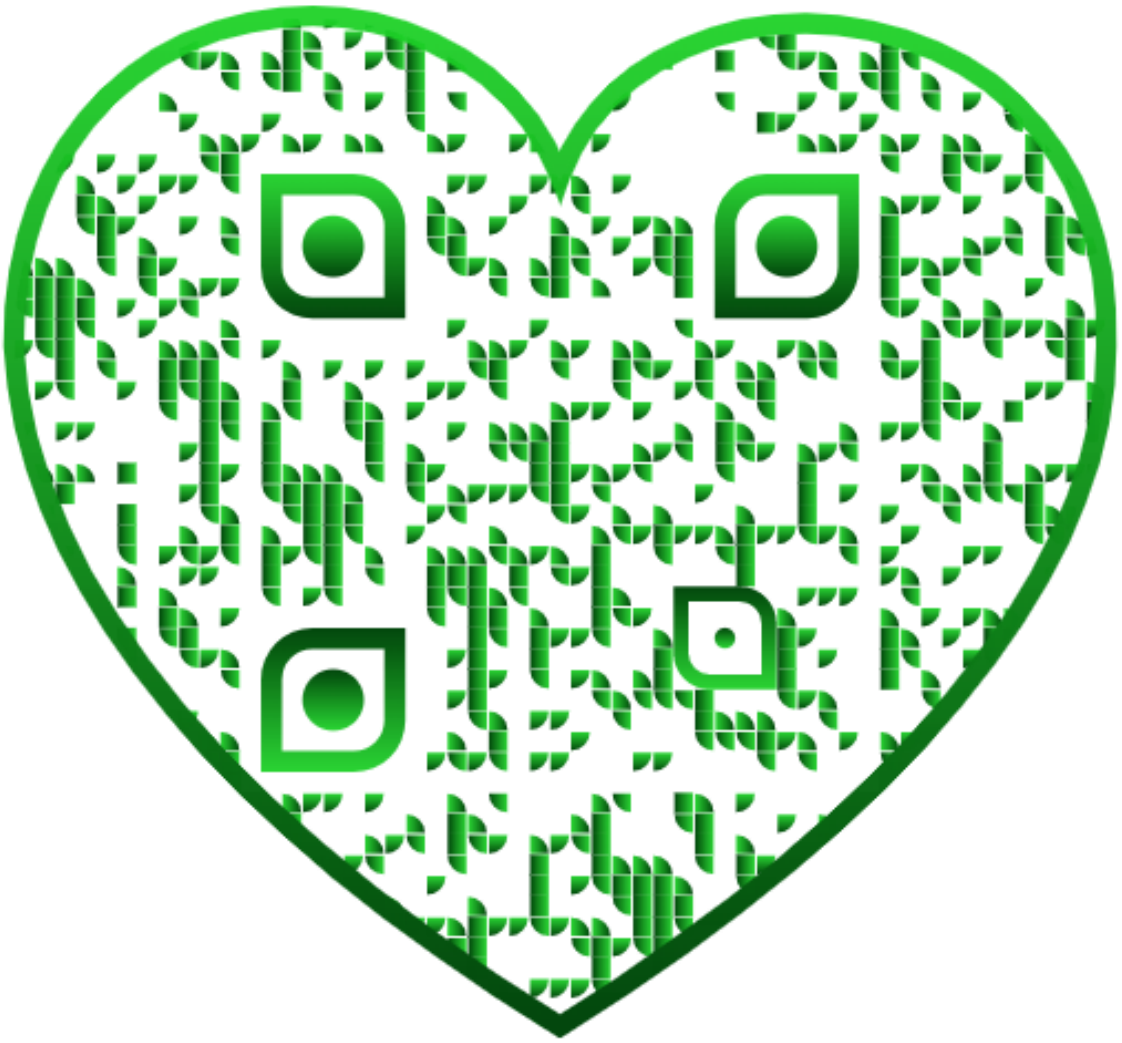


The Branch Davidians, the Peoples Temple, and Heaven's Gate

The History of 20th Century America's Most Notorious Cults



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The Branch Davidians, the Peoples Temple, and Heaven's Gate: The History of 20th Century America's Most Notorious Cults

By Charles River Editors

A picture of Jim Jones and children from a Peoples Temple brochure

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Introduction

Picture of a tank breaking down one of the compound's walls

"If you are a Branch Davidian, Christ lives on a threadbare piece of land 10 miles east of here called Mount Carmel. He has dimples, claims a ninth-grade education, married his legal wife when she was 14, enjoys a beer now and then, plays a mean guitar, reportedly packs a 9mm Glock and keeps an arsenal of military assault rifles, and willingly admits that he is a sinner without equal." – The opening passage of "The Sinful Messiah", published in the *Waco Tribune-Herald* on February 27, 1993

To most people, it is almost impossible to understand the mere existence, let alone the baffling, yet indubitable appeal of doomsday cults, but they have been morbidly fascinating phenomena throughout history.

One such recent cult is the infamous Chinese quasi-Christian subgroup Eastern Lightning, also known as the "Church of the Almighty God," founded in 1991 and officially banned in 1995. Apart from its peculiar dogma that Jesus Christ has returned to Earth in the form of a Chinese

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woman and its involvement in multiple crimes and controversies, including alleged mass kidnappings and the murder of a 37-year-old saleswoman, its members were some of the most aggressive proponents of the Mayan doomsday theory, which predicted the end of the world on December 21, 2012. But doomsday cults are far older than most would imagine. Montanism, another Christian offshoot, was established by the exclusive channeler of the Paraclete (the Biblical Spirit of Truth), Montanus, in Phrygia in the 2nd century CE. In its time, hundreds, if not thousands of Christian villagers relinquished their homes and belongings to congregate at a rolling plain between the villages of Tymion and Pepuza, where they awaited the second coming of Christ.

Not all apocalyptic cults have waited for the anti-climactic finales of their failed doomsday prophecies. At the end of the 19th century, one of the major evangelists in the United States preached his revivalist ideals and started a wave of evangelism that would last well into the 20th century. Dwight Moody, an American evangelist who founded the Moody Church, deplored the new scholarly readings of the Bible, the theory of evolution, and preached a literal second coming of Christ happening soon. Moody's fundamentalism produced energetic reactions from various apocalyptic cults, and many of them found in the New Testament's Book of Revelation their reason for existing and their expectations of the imminent end of the world. In some cases, these cults tried to help bring it about, figuring that if the end of the world didn't arrive on its own, they would try to usher it in themselves.

The United States has never had a shortage of cults based on religious teachings and charismatic leaders, but perhaps none are as infamous as Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple, which remain notorious for the mass murder-suicide event in Jonestown, Guyana on November 18, 1978, during which nearly 900 people drank cyanide-laced Flavor Aid, including nearly 300 children. To this day, "drinking the Kool-Aid" is a popular phrase in America to refer to people who blindly follow a person or idea without thought, and the event at Jonestown was the deadliest deliberate act involving Americans in history until the 9/11 attacks. In addition to those deaths, Peoples Temple members also murdered a handful of others on the

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same day, including journalists, a member trying to leave Jonestown, and Congressman Leo Ryan.

Almost from birth, Jones believed he had a higher calling, and after being immersed in various Christian churches and both political and religious doctrine, Jones founded the Peoples Temple in Indianapolis in 1955, when he was still in his mid-20s. While that might have been an unusual course in life for most Americans, Jones was hardly the first to take such a path, and indeed, his group expanded at a remarkable pace in the 1960s, which included a move to California after Jones claimed to foresee a nuclear attack on Chicago and the destruction of Indianapolis. By the 1970s, services at the group's Temple attracted thousands of visitors, even as Jones increasingly criticized Christianity and the Bible.

Of course, none of the previous locations earned the notoriety of Jonestown, which the Peoples Temple established in Guyana along the northern coast of South America in the mid-'70s. Meant to be a "socialist paradise" and "sanctuary" from America's "creeping fascism," over 900 members headed to the new settlement by 1978. That November, Congressman Leo Ryan arrived in Jonestown to investigate various claims about the Peoples Temple and met with some members who wished to defect from the group. In response, Jones issued a tape decrying outsiders' efforts and directing members to commit suicide, and when some pushed back, he chided them: "Stop these hysterics. This is not the way for people who are socialists or communists to die. No way for us to die. We must die with some dignity."

Survivors described the ensuing event, during which children drank the poison first and were followed by parents who lay down to die as a family. Others indicated that Jones had simulated mass suicides on a couple of other occasions before to test members' loyalty as well, so people remained unsure whether the event was real, even as Jones told them, "I tell you, I don't care how many screams you hear, I don't care how many anguished cries...death is a million times preferable to ten more days of this life. If you knew what was ahead of you – if you knew what was ahead of you, you'd be glad to be stepping over tonight." Although many began to worry once they saw the poison take effect in others, most of those who drank the

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poison were dead within 5 minutes, while Jones apparently shot himself in the head.

David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians, had deep convictions based on the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, and his sect believed the world was in the power of Satan and that the nations were merging to form a new Babylon. David hoped to establish the kingdom in Jerusalem, where, according to him, he would suffer martyrdom. The headquarters of the sect was a complex called Mount Carmel Center located in Waco, Texas. In the last manuscript produced by Koresh, which was preserved by a woman named Ruth Riddle who escaped the fire, the cult leader spoke extensively about his identity and the mystery of the Seven Seals. Koresh claimed to be the mysterious Lamb of Revelation who opens the sealed scroll, as well as the figure who rides the White Horse when the first seal is opened.

In addition to influencing how the government approached potential future conflicts with other groups, Waco's most important legacy was that it enraged people who already had an anti-government bent. The most notable, of course, was Timothy McVeigh, who conducted what was at the time the deadliest terrorist attack in American history in Oklahoma City on the second anniversary of the final confrontation at Waco.

While Waco remains notorious more for the federal agents' siege of Koresh's compound and the deaths of the Branch Davidians, it was followed a few years later by a mass suicide carried out by one of the most notorious doomsday cults in American history. On paper, the extraordinarily unorthodox ideology spouted by Heaven's Gate ranks near the top of the list of most outlandish end-of-the-world prophecies, and it was built on a blend of Christian, Gnostic, supernatural, New Age, and extraterrestrial lore. Although the cult did not speak in Christian terms, it was clearly apocalyptic, and its belief system was a strange mix between science fiction and the basic message of Revelation. The cult's leader, Marshall Applewhite, and his female companion, Bonnie Nettles, concluded that they were the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11:3-4: "And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two

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hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the Earth."

Applewhite believed the Earth would be transformed and renewed, and that evil entities (not beasts, but in this case, aliens) called Luciferans conspired against humanity. In his view, the elect members of Heaven's Gate would be taken up to a spaceship when the hour came. The opportunity to join the Rapture arrived with the passing of comet Hale-Bopp in 1997. Applewhite told his congregation that a spaceship was following the comet, and that the event would mark the closure of the gates of Heaven, making the spaceship the last opportunity to leave Earth. Over the course of three days, 39 members committed ritual mass suicide, all dressed identically, to be taken up by the UFO.

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The Peoples Temple

The Gifted Pastoral and Healing Ministry

"James Jones has brought the gifted pastoral and healing ministry to the entire body of Christ. He is not affiliated with any sectarian organization; however, he cooperates extensively with all ecumenical efforts for greater fellowship. He has a wide range of experiences and training in diversified fields. He has wandered through every religious circle in his search for reality and he went on to find his final abiding place at the foot of God's self-revelation, i.e. the divine-human Jesus. He embodies the love and humanitarianism of the historic Jesus in the name of universality. Truly the I Am hath sent him. He has been educated two years at Indiana University and Butler University. He excelled in both institutions. Also, he receives correspondence training in Theology from Cleveland Holiness Bible Institute and courses in ministerial study from the Methodist conference. He has served as a social worker in the Marion County Department of Public Welfare in the state of Indiana. … Pastor Jones is presently pursuing the study of law in the Indiana University graduate division. It is his conviction that legal knowledge will qualify him to counsel the numerous persons who require his advice in one of the state prisons where he serves in a chaplain's capacity. He has observed many young people who have suffered injustice because of a few mercenary and insensitive legal counselors." - Rev. and Mrs. Russell Winberg, "Pastor Jones Meets Rev. M. J. Divine" (1959)

When a tragedy such as the one that happened to the members of the Peoples Temple occurs, people cannot help but ask questions. How did this happen? What was it about Jim Jones that inspired people to follow him even to their deaths? When did it all begin?

As with other Messianic types, the complexes that Jim Jones eventually exhibited developed in early adulthood, and while neighbors of such individuals often claim they seemed normal, this was never the case with Jones, who seemed almost destined from birth for some kind of bizarre existence. Indeed, his mother, Lynetta Putnam Jones, believed when her son was born in Randolph County, Indiana on May 13, 1931 that she had indeed given birth to the Messiah.

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Picture of Jim Jones owned by the Jonestown Institute

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Picture of Lynetta owned by the Jonestown Institute

The family moved to Lynn, Indiana in 1934, and while Lynetta was always his biggest supporter, his father James, a World War I veteran who apparently had a drinking problem, was not. Lynetta remembered, "It was little consolation to me that young Jim's father was always in town where Jim could easily find him if in trouble. Big Jim was usually at the pool room trouncing his associates in games of chance and strangely it very seldom happened that he chanced to lose a game of chance but when he did he would fly into a towering rage that shook the town and bid fair to cause him to drop dead in his tracks. … It might be said, however, that his chance of keeping up with the activities of young Jim was less likely than would have been the case had he tried to stroke the top knot of a hummingbird. Furthermore Jim Babe would not [go] into the pool room no matter what occurred for he had harbored a towering resentment of the place from infancy. … Following such great rages, young Jim could be found sitting among the big rats behind the pool hall instructing them, 'You can do it, boys and girls. Just look at those large piles of sawdust from the work of your teeth, little brothers. It cannot be long now until you have chewed the floor out from under them, but when you work on the front foundation, be sure you work under the floor, so the ol' fools will not try to shoot or poison you.'" Lynette insisted that she later heard the pool hall owner complain, "Boys, if these darn rats don't clear out, not a splinter will be standing come winter to mark the spot where this pool hall stood."

When not preaching to rats, young Jones spent much of his time reading and studying the works of famous leaders of all types, from Adolf Hitler to Gandhi, and he also became fascinated (if not obsessed) with religious beliefs. He had few friends, as Phyllis Wilmore-Zimmerman recalled, "I grew up with Jimmy Jones. We started first grade together. My brothers used to go over to Jimmy's house and hung around his barn, which was where he played. … My brothers came back with stories of him conducting funerals for small animals that had died. … Jimmy's father did not work, did not have a job, and was a drunk. Jim's mother had to work in order to support the family." Another friend, Chuck Wilmore, remembered, "From the time I was five years old, I thought Jimmy was a really weird kid, there was something not quite right. He was obsessed with religion; he was obsessed with death.

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… A friend of mine told me that he saw Jimmy kill a cat with a knife. Well having a funeral for it was a little strange, killing the animal was very strange."

Jones, who felt like an outcast in his own home and community, found friends and acceptance elsewhere, as he later noted: "There's a little town in Indiana. The moment I think of it a great deal of pain comes. As a child I was undoubtedly one of the poor in the community, never accepted. Born as it were on the wrong side of the tracks. … Feeling as an outcast, I'd early developed a sensitivity for the problems of blacks. I brought the only black young man in the town home and my dad said that he could not come in and I said, 'Then I shan't,' and I did not see my dad for many years."

Not long after that incident, Lynetta and Jim, Sr. separated, and mother and son moved to Richmond, Indiana, where Jones graduated from high school with honors in December 1948. The following year, while attending Indiana University in Bloomington, he married Marceline Baldwin. In 1951, the two moved to Indianapolis, where Jim enrolled in Butler University and eventually earned a degree in secondary education.

Marceline

However, it was obvious that Jones' true interest was not in teaching; in fact, his fascination with religion and longing for acceptance had by this time led him to the congregation of a local Pentecostal Church. It was there that

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he finally felt at home, and Jones also experienced how the pastors were viewed as fathers who led with almost unlimited power and authority. This clearly appealed to him.

Moreover, Jones also aimed to be more inclusive and equal, especially when it came to minorities. June Cordell, who lost her mother-in-law to the Peoples Temple, gave one example of how Jones recruited: "The first time I met Jim Jones was Easter 1953. My mother-in-law, Edith Cordell, had a monkey and it hung itself and she wanted to replace the monkey. So she looked in the Indianapolis Star, and in that Indianapolis Star was Jim Jones's ad that he had some monkeys to sell. So it was through that that she met Jim Jones, and came back saying that he had invited her to church this next Sunday. … It didn't make no difference what color you were. It was everybody welcome there in that church and he made it very plain from the platform." This was a radical stance in the mid-1950s, as June's father-in-law Eugene observed, "We had some people that disagreed with Jimmy. They got up in the audience and they said they disagreed with him. They did not like this integration part of the services. We did ask people to leave the church one night because of that." Reverend Garnett Day, a minister in the area at that time, noted, "Jim was breaking new ground in race relations at a time when the ground was still pretty hard against that. Jim Jones was hated and despised by some people, particularly in the white community."

Breaking ground was a great way to get attention, something Jones craved in ever increasing quantities. At the same time, this is not to say that he did not sincerely care about the African-American community; indeed, he and Marceline took the then radical step of adopting a black baby, whom they named Jim Jones, Jr. Jones, Jr. later pointed out that he "was the first Negro child adopted by a Caucasian family in the state of Indiana. Jim and Marceline actually went to adopt a Caucasian child. The story goes that I was crying real loud and it drew attention for Marceline to come over, and once she picked me up, I stopped crying. My family was a template of a rainbow family. We had an African American, we had two American Asian and we had his natural son, homemade."

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The Jonestown Institute's picture of Kimo (Jim Jones' biological son) and John Stoen (sitting), who was part of a custody dispute between Jones and Stoen's father and died at Jonestown

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The Jonestown Institute's picture of Kimo

In 1954, Jones left the Somerset Methodist Church to form his own congregation, which he called Community Unity, and two years later, the group moved into its own building and became the Wings of Deliverance Church. Shortly after the move, Jones renamed the church the Peoples Temple. In 1956, its newsletter proclaimed, "Peoples Temple is broadcasting on W.O.W.O. 1190 on your Dial from Fort Wayne every Sunday morning at 8:00 A.M. It is a very expensive medium of communication but it is so beneficial to those whose material and spiritual body needs the healing power of God. We are receiving many letters of thanks for the help the radio is given them but very few are sending any support to keep us on the air. Won't you please do your part to reach out over the air for those who need this message? Send us a token to be dedicated to the work of the Lord as soon as you can as next week may be too late as we need immediate aid to

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continue. We are helping the needy thru our commissary every Monday by giving them food and clothes on Sunday; we have service all day. Every denomination and every race is welcome. We serve 2 pitch-in meals. Everyone is welcome."

A picture of Jones' first church

If anything, Jones proved to be a master at keeping those who had fallen under his spell faithful to his mission. He once wrote to parishioner Earl Jackson, "My beloved brother in Christ, concern for you kept me up praying the entire night! I [am] going to speak sincerely and frankly! God sent you to People's Temple and you must not release yourself. I know there are things about the Message that you may not see but it is God. As long as we love Christ we have unity and understanding to compensate for all the little things you & I might disagree on. Earl you will be making a serious mistake if you leave our Temple that God has ordained and declared you to be a part of. Don't go out to see the proof of what I just said. Hear me as a voice crying to you from the depths of love & fondness for you. 'Stand still and see the

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salvation of the Lord.' Don't go back on the light! I know you wouldn't intentionally but if you leave the place that Christ has set you in[,] much sorrow and heartache will be the result. God impressed my mind strongly in every prayer in the early hours before dawn that you would be making a terrible mistake to leave. Please hear my counsel which I give with a heart full of love for you!"

The Mother Temple

"Pastor Jim Jones founded the first Peoples' Temple in Indiana. While in Indianapolis, he was Human Rights Commissioner. In California, he has been foreman of the Mendocino County Grand Jury and is currently a director of the federally-funded Mendo-Lake Counties Legal Services Foundation. He has been self-supporting from the start of his ministry, most recently as a public school teacher. Pastor Jones ministers to a congregation of over 4000 active members. Facilities at the mother Temple on 60 beautiful acres in Redwood Valley, California, include senior citizens' homes, a children's home, a community center with a large indoor heated swimming pool, a drug rehabilitation center where over 100 youths have been rescued from the drug scene, and an animal refuge. This semester the Temple is sponsoring 58 young people attending college, most of whom are living in the four college dormitories sponsored by the church. Pastor Jones also has congregations totaling several thousands in San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, Richmond, San Mateo, Palo Alto, San Jose, Sacramento, Stockton, Fresno, and Los Angeles, Calif.; Philadelphia, Pa.; and Seattle and Tacoma, Wash. Pastor Jones, with members of the large interracial youth choir and orchestra, will be coming in some of our modern fleet of air-conditioned Greyhound-type busses." – Excerpt from a flyer announcing Peoples Temple events

Even as the flock grew, Jones became rather unpopular in his home state over time, so in 1965, he decided to move his congregation to what he considered a more open-minded part of the country. Fielding McGehee, who lost a family member to the cult, wrote, "There had been pressures on him to leave Indianapolis. He thought that Indianapolis was too racist of a place for him to be, and he wanted to take his people out. … He chose Ukiah in northern California — about 90 miles north of San Francisco — because

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there was an article in Esquire Magazine that said that Ukiah was one of the nine places in the world that in the event of thermonuclear attack, people would survive."

Such a move understandably concerned people who had family members among the Peoples Temple's followers. Worried about his wife's plans to head west, Eugene Cordell recalled, "I told Edith, 'If you follow Jimmy to California, you're crazy.' So what did Jimmy do, but took her to a psychiatrist and sent me a certified letter that she is of sound mind, and she is not crazy. I was there the afternoon that Edith drove away. I didn't know I'd never see her again."

The trip across country was quite an undertaking, but according to Jones, Jr., "The move to California was really fun. There were about twelve to fifteen cars driving across United States and making that journey to a place that none of us knew, you know — none of us could even imagine. We were going to California, our new world." Rebecca Moore, who had a family member in the cult, explained the move's appeal: "California is perceived to be a very progressive state. This would be the place to implement the dream of racial equality. Not Indianapolis, which seems hopeless, but California, which seems to be the Promised Land. … Peoples Temple really was a black church. It was led by a white minister, but in terms of the worship service, commitment to the social gospel, its membership — it functioned completely like a black church."

Once established in California, the Peoples Temple began to grow by leaps and bounds. Joyce Shaw-Houston, a member at that time, later recalled, "The focus of Jim's message was taken from the Bible, where Jesus in his earliest days told people to sell all things and have all things in common." Deborah Layton, whose husband Larry was one of Jones' closest confidants, added, "The membership increased substantially as he procured more and more Greyhound buses and fixed them up, and every summer he began this cross-country tour. … As older people joined, it took a year or so and he'd convince the people that he was doing so much in the community and so why not rather than just tithe your twenty percent, why not sell your home, give the money to the church? And that is what people began to do. … For those people that hadn't grown up in the apostolic world, Jim would say, you know — "I know this is different for you. But for people to come from

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extremely religious backgrounds — so that I can bring them forward to the message that's so important for all of us today and that is activism — then I need to speak on each person's level."

For his part, Jones was understandably proud of his accomplishments to date. Speaking about his new church after the move, he claimed, "We started with about a hundred and forty-one people and from that, we've grown to a very thriving congregation. We have about every level of society, all socio-economic income strata — professional down to the ordinary field worker, field laborer. Really, it's beautiful to see that all these divisions have been broken down — not only race, but any differences of economic position. … Jesus Christ had the most revolutionary teachings to be said, in the sense that he said to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take in the stranger, administer to those who are widows and afflicted in their suffering. And we feel that no one really tried Christianity too effectively in the Judeo-Christian tradition."

Jones' charismatic style of preaching, which borrowed much from Marxist socialist views, was very attractive to many in California and outside of it. During the church's bus trips around the country, he would tell people, "You got nothing to lose. Who else is going to stand and look you in the face and say, 'Come and I'll give you a job. Come and I'll give you a home. Come and I'll give you a bed?' 'But I've got nothing but a pension.' 'Go and leave your pension behind,' who else will tell you that? Who'll tell you, 'I'll put you on that bus tomorrow?' … Somebody is gonna get on the freedom train in Philadelphia!" Around this time, Bryan Kravitz was attracted by Jones' siren call: "I decided not to go to Vietnam, and I was just at the point of what am I going to do with myself? I heard Jim Jones was going to be coming to Philadelphia, and coming to Benjamin Franklin High School. And I went Wednesday night and I listened to him, and I was impressed by how it was such an interracial group and people were really happy. … I heard Jim Jones talking about equality among races, what it's like living in California, in the Redwood Valley, the good works that they're doing. Things that, like, I wanted to get involved with, but didn't even know where to make an entrée. And all of a sudden, the answer was there. … He was there for three evenings, and the third evening I went off on the bus and came to California."

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During one of these bus trips, this one to Washington, D.C. in 1973, the congregation attracted press attention by taking time to pick up litter around the Capitol. A *Washington Post* editorial praised the group, "The hands-down winners of anybody's tourist-of-the-year award have got to be the 660 wonderful members of the People's Temple Christian Church of Redwood Valley, California – who bend over backwards to leave every place they visit more attractive than when they arrived. Like thousands of other tourists, they went calling on the U.S. capitol the other day, but unlike others who tramp through our town spreading litter helter-skelter, this spirited group of travelers fanned out from their 13 buses and spent about an hour cleaning up the grounds. One 82-year-old woman who was policing the area at the foot of the Capitol explained to reporter Frank Jones that the members take pleasure in sweeping across the country this way. The church, which has black, white, and American Indian members, has already won friends in dozens of cities since its tour left Redwood Valley Aug. 8, and still more areas will benefit by the members' stop offs on their return trip."

This trip, and many others like it, bore amazing fruit for the group as membership continued to grow. Garrett Lambrey later recalled, "When I joined Peoples Temple in the spring of 1966, there were exactly eighty-one members. Five years later, an extended family of eighty people had become an organization of thousands." Jones, Jr., credited part of Jones' success with his ability to reach out to many different types of people. He once said of his father, "He talked black. He really understood it. He understood how it was to be treated differently. And that's from his roots coming out of Lynn." Juanell Smart agreed, adding, "When people heard Jim, they didn't look upon him as being a white preacher, you know. People didn't look at Jim as being white. He was not white. He was just their preacher." Jones himself was proud of his work, especially with senior citizens: "Now in this church, what have we done in a short time? We have four senior citizens' homes that are the most innovating, the most beautiful you want to see. … Now my home is stone block and there's not a piece of new furniture in it. But our senior citizen homes, they're elegant. And that's beautiful."

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The Jonestown Institute's picture of a Peoples Temple dorm located in Santa Clara

Can You Not See The Mystery?

"God and Jesus are as reincarnatable as a child's smile. Matthew 25 says when you feed a hungry person or clothe a naked child you have been doing it directly to Jesus Himself. Let me bring to your remembrance that after Jesus left the Body in the Sonship degree, not even those who had lived and worked with him for four years recognized the very same Jesus when he appeared in a different likeness on the road as His followers departed from the tomb. Imagine! they thought they had been speaking with a gardener. Can you not see the mystery? God never appears the same way twice. God is Love, therefore whoever reincarnates love more fully should be followed: As Paul the apostle related in yesteryear, 'follow me as I follow Christ.' I am causing untold thousands to believe in the Jesus of ancient history by the great miracles of healings, prophecies and discernments I perform in His name! Many have believed God to be dead until I showed them that He is as tangible as the food they eat and the air they breathe. Oh, what a privilege it is to live in this recognition and be able to personify the Mind and Works of God in Christ, therefore enabling the pure in heart to see God, and know Him aright, which is life eternal." – Jim Jones, "The Letter Killeth, but the Spirit Giveth LIFE"

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The Peoples Temple and its all-inclusive nature understandably appealed to many, but perhaps not surprisingly, Jones' intensions were not completely altruistic. In order to live in those homes, the seniors had to sign over to the church not just their life savings but their monthly Social Security and retirement checks. While this was not altogether different from the policies of many similar homes at that time, Jones was able to staff his facilities almost entirely with volunteers, allowing the church to use the profits as he saw fit. Neva Hargrave, a member during this time, explained, "It got to the point where there were so many duties in the Temple that some people had to become full time. So when you were full-time Temple, you worked about twenty hours a day. We turned our paychecks over every time we got paid. And then we got an allowance — five dollars a week."

Another member, Laura Kohl, described her week as follows: "My week kind of ran like this — I'd work my regular job on Mondays, you know, eight to five. Then, I'd work on files. Wednesday night we'd have a meeting in Redwood Valley and I'd go to the meeting for — until probably 10 or 10:30. And Friday, I'd go to work and I'd get off of work, and I'd hop on the bus or drive the bus to San Francisco. And often on Saturday night, we'd have planning commission meetings until 2 or 3 in the morning. And then Sunday, we'd have a Sunday morning service and then around one o'clock hop on the buses, drive up, drop people off in San Francisco, and drive up to Redwood Valley. It changed over the years, but it was always busy."

Being this busy was exhausting, and it made people easier to control, as member Hue Fortson once observed: "We would always try to let each other know the next day, 'Well, how long did you sleep?' 'Oh, I slept two hours.' 'You only slept two? Well, I slept an hour-and-a-half.' Being in an environment where you're constantly up, you're constantly busy, and you're made to feel guilty if you take too many luxuries like sleeping — you tend to not really think for yourself. And I did allow Jones to think for me because I figured that he had the better plan. I gave my rights up to him. As many others did. … There was a senior citizen and we nicknamed her Power. He would have her to come up in the midst of one of his meetings, and she used to say, 'The man got power. The man got power, ya'll.' And the whole place would just go wild."

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These events, during which people would "go wild," often featured healing services in which Jones claimed he could heal people of their physical ailments. Hargrave admitted, "One of the most incredible healings, to me, was this little old lady and she was in a wheelchair. Jim said, 'Darlin', you know, today is your day. We're going to — you're going to get healed today.' He said, 'We're going to — we're going to heal those legs of yours. You're going to walk again.' And the whole auditorium went totally crazy. And she takes this real slow, shaky step. She said, 'I can feel it.' He said, 'Yes, I know you can feel it. Now take your other leg and do it.' And so another real slow, shaky step and he says, 'Now I want you to walk toward me.' And she starts taking forward steps. And pretty soon she is walking. And she starts walking up one of the aisles. And pretty soon she's running. Well, by this time the whole congregation's running down these aisles with us — we're all just running around the aisles, just hoopin' and hollerin' up a storm. Later, I found out that this person that I had seen healed and cried with was really one of the secretaries, made up to look crippled and blind."

The "healings" Jones performed were an important part of the ministry because it seemed Jones had power over life and death, and with that, people began to consider him as much more than an average man. As member Janet Shular put it, "People lifted Jim to a level of adoration because many believed that he had healed them of cancer. Many believed that he had saved their son or daughter from an automobile accident. There were many reasons for many people to admire, love, excuse, over look much of what Jim did."

Most sincere ministers, when credited by their flock with being supernatural, turn the praise away from themselves and toward a higher power, but by the early 1970s, there was no higher power in Jim Jones' mind than Jim Jones. Fortson recalled, "He said, 'A lot of you people, you Christian people coming in, you're so hung-up on this Bible.' He said, 'This black book has held down black people for the last two-hundred years.' He said, 'But I'm going to show you this has no power.' So he leaned way back like a football player and he flung it. And when he flung it and let it go, the place got dead quiet like. And he waited until it hit the floor — POW! When it hit the floor, he stood and he looked back and forth. He said, 'Now, did you see any lightning come from the sky and strike me dead?' And he said, 'What you need to believe in is what you can see.' He said, 'If you see me as

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your friend, I'll be your friend. As you see me as your father, I'll be your father, for those of you that don't have a father.' He said, 'If you see me as your savior, I'll be your savior.' He said, even so, 'If you see me as your God, I'll be your God.'"

In the early 1970s, in an attempt make even higher demands upon his followers, Jones wrote something of a policy of expectations for his followers and himself (or at least he claimed). Though there were 10 of them, there was little to no similarity between his rules and the 10 Commandments. It was entitled, "A True Follower of This Activist Christian Ministry," and it gave the following directives:

> "ATTEMPTS TO BECOME JEALOUS OF NONE … GIVING OF GREAT MERCY … one who treats friends and foes alike, never allows emotions to rule, has no special loves, and treats all the same. Love all people, but no individual above this Principle.
>
> ATTEMPTS AT ALL TIMES TO BE FREE … free from jealousy, free from egotism, free from any need for exultation, free from pride, free from sorrow and self pity, free from fear of any man or any thing.
>
> LOVES THE SILENCE … He can be at peace and bliss with no one present, and can enjoy times of introspection."

These first three articles may very well have struck even his most faithful followers as ironic since Jones was already known to have "special loves" and was certainly far from free of egotism, but they were likely to overlook any faults in the one to whom they had pledged their lives, believing perhaps that he was chosen to be so far above them that the rules did not apply to him. However, it is very unlikely that anyone as busy in the work of the church as Jones demanded his disciples to be could possibly know what silence was, much less love it.

Other rules included the following:

> "SHOULD HAVE A DISCIPLINED REASON … and not do things impulsively. His actions should be of such a character as not to cause dread. He renounces his accomplishments and takes

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no thought for the fruit of his work. “But his delight is in the law of the (Good Shepherd); and in his law doth he meditate (and act upon) day and night.” (Psalms 1:2)

“DOES NOTHING FOR REWARD, BUT RATHER FOR THE SHEER JOY OF DOING … If you make a mistake, don’t go about defending yourself. Take thought for your intent, that you are trying to do the right thing, but after it is done, do not dwell on the action. (If I fell down yesterday, today I can stand up erect again.)

“OWES NO MAN ANYTHING BUT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER … As I have said before, “The highest worship to Deity is service to your fellowman.” “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, because you have love for one another.”

“… ASKS NOTHING FROM GOD (GOOD) … that is, asks nothing for himself. He lives a life of Principle and has no difference in attachments. This way of life precludes one thing. You cannot have any strong superficial attachments (me and mine attitude). Attachment forming is self-serving.”

Certainly, a disciplined reason in this case meant one entirely given over to following Jones’ teachings. Likewise, anyone thoroughly involved in the church would have no reason to expect any sort of reward, even in the form of a salary. Jones made it very clear that he owed his followers nothing but that they owed him service, such as that which they might give God. At the same time, they should ask him for nothing, being instead content to do whatever he asked.

Finally, there were the last precepts, which focused on the importance of having no desire or interest in life other than Jones and his church.

“DOES NOT WORSHIP THINGS … Do not talk about them. Eliminate fretting and pride. Do not allow yourself to be offended. This includes intemperance of eating habits that are ailing your bodies.

“TREATS HEAT AND COLD ALIKE … pain and blessing just alike, in order to avoid the vulnerability of that which

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> destroys most from being a channel of truth, such as flattery, bribery, and intimidation. Have firm convictions. Do not vacillate! Always find gratitude in whatever state you find yourselves at the time. Treat prosperity and misery alike.
>
> "IS ONE FOR WHOM ALL THINGS HAVE LOST THEIR ATTRACTION … If you find yourself in boredom to such a degree it is difficult to contemplate on esoteric values, it is not something to be discouraged about necessarily. It can be a sign that the detachment you have been working for has come. If you find the greatest peace in the smile of a child, or the feel of a breeze, or the myriad formations of the sky, it is not because you are a vain dreamer, but because you have begun to reach that place of self-denial or detachment that one must attain to, to be free of ego and self love. As scripture has stated, one must deny self and take up his one cross in order to follow the Christ. (Luke 9:23)"

It is interesting to note that there is no teaching in the precepts laid down concerning sexuality or sexual expression, and there was likely a specific reason for this. As Jones became more obsessed with his own deity, he also began to act out sexually in a manner that was considered taboo and inconsistent with mainstream Christianity at the time. Joyce Shaw-Houston remembered, "Jim said that all of us were homosexuals, everyone except — he was the only heterosexual on the planet. And that the women were all lesbians and the guys were all gay. And so anyone that showed any interest in sex was just compensating." Deborah Layton supported this recollection: "What he explained to each of us, and in sermons, was that sexual relationships were very selfish and they took away from the focus of the church — and that was to help others. Jim was not celibate. Nobody knew that until perhaps it was their time to find out. What he spoke from the pulpit wasn't what he did behind the scenes."

Layton's last remark was a massive understatement, as Tim Carter learned: "I had been in the Temple for just a few months. I was sent backstage in Los Angeles to — to get something for somebody, I don't remember what. And Jones happened to be coming out of his room and he said, 'Hi Tim, how are you doing? How is it going? How do you like everything so far?' And, 'Oh,

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I like it a lot.' And, 'you know, it's really cool.' I don't remember exactly. And he reached up and kind of patted the back of my neck, and he said, 'I'll fuck you in the ass if you want.' And I just kind of stammered, 'No.' You know, 'No.' And he said, 'Well, you know, if you ever want that, that's okay, just let me know and we'll do that.'"

It seems that Jones took great pleasure in controlling people sexually, perhaps seeing it as yet another way to break them away from other human relationships so that they could focus all their energy and affection on him. All the while, thanks to the control he had by this time developed over his followers, many believed that whatever he said had to be true and were thus happy to forego their own preferences in favor of pleasing him. Fortson described one scene: "I remember one night, one of the brothers had stood up and said, 'You know, I think everybody that wants Father to fuck them in the butt, you need to take an enema first.' I'm telling you the truth man, I'm telling you the truth. And then the question went on, 'Well, how many of you in here have had him to do that?' And whether they were lying or just following suit, hands of the men just went up around the room. And I'm sitting there petrified because I'm like, 'Is this what it's leading to, that I'm supposed to get to?' And I'm thinking, 'hmmm.' But I played it off like, 'Okay, I'm being cool. Okay, if that's where they at, that's not where I'm at.' Because I'm thinking, 'My wife — I'm happy with my wife. With this sleep I'm not getting, I'm not getting enough anyway.'"

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A Peoples Temple building in Los Angeles

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Jonestown Institute's picture of Jones and others at a group award dinner in San Francisco

Jonestown Institute's picture of members of the group holding up an issue of the publication *Peoples Forum*

The Promised Land

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"Jim spoke on the Chicago trip. They met some important people. The future will show what was accomplished. The healings were beyond parallel. The meeting the last night lasted until morning. The group wants to establish a Temple in Chicago. Two miracles took place on the buses. They got in to Chicago hours earlier than they could have if no mishaps had occurred. The buses will come back directly. Our people were graciously received by the Muslim leadership, though their temple here had not cleared the appointment as they said they had. … Jim asked how many are looking forward to living in the Promised Land. Only a scattered few say they aren't. One young person said she felt it was for the old and the very young; the young should stay here. Jim answered that if there was a need, we all must go. Another, a man, wanted to stand with Father. Jim: 'He's right, but I don't want to see you starve.' One elderly woman: 'If push comes to shove. I'll go.' Another woman wanted to stay to fight if Jim stays. Jim said this is his home, he was here before Ford. 'I resent their making a mess of it. If they won't let ten people go, none of us will go. We'll stand together.'" – A July 1975 diary entry made by Edith Roller, who later died at Jonestown

In the early 1970s, Jones had at least one child with a parishioner, but he was becoming more and more interested in death than life. He once told his congregation sarcastically, "We had a lady who visited us a week ago here and was speaking to one at the door, and she was a member of a prominent church, a pastor's wife, and she said, 'I think that the poor should be made to control how many children they bring into the earth.' You remember? Some leading scientists say, 'We have to have euthanasia.' Oh, no. Oh, no. Who's going to decide who and when a person's going to die? We must never allow that because this is the kind of thing that ushers in the terror of a Hitler's Germany. We must not allow these kind of things to enter our consciousness."

On another occasion, during a New Year's Eve party, he took his plan a step further. According to Hargrave, "Jim started talking about our cause and he said, 'This punch is going to be passed out to everybody here.' We all drank our punch and then he said, 'You just drank poison. And we will all die, right here in the church, together as one.' The women were just screaming, 'Oh no, my baby, my baby,' and others just sat there. And all of a sudden, Jim says, 'That wasn't poison you drank.'" Similarly, Deborah

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Layton recounted, “Everyone, including the children, was told to line up. As we passed through the line, we were given a small glass of red liquid to drink. We were told that the liquid contained poison and that we would die within 45 minutes. We all did as we were told. When the time came when we should have dropped dead, Rev. Jones explained that the poison was not real and that we had just been through a loyalty test. He warned us that the time was not far off when it would become necessary for us to die by our own hands."

At the time, Jones claimed he only said that to test people’s loyalty, but as member Janet Shular pointed out, “It wasn’t about our loyalty, because we were demonstrating loyalty all the time. Coming there, being there in the meetings, sitting, listening — you know, supporting, working. And I thought it had a lot more to do with Jim’s sense of rehearsal. Did he feel like he was potent and — and omnipotent enough to really get people to kill themselves when he said so? And that frightened the hell out of me.”

While there were a myriad of problems within the Peoples Temple, to the outside world the congregation seemed to be a fine example of a church busy doing good works for the less fortunate. Naturally, Jones made good use of this image to gain a new kind of power: political leadership in California. In some ways, San Francisco and its progressive politically climate was perfect for the sort of gospel Jones preached, one of outreach to others and care for the poor. As former member Vernon Gosney observed, “If you had a demonstration in San Francisco and you wanted people to show up, Jim Jones — the Peoples Temple — could be there in twenty minutes, with hundreds of people. And we would be enthusiastic. There was an attitude of, ‘We can change the world.’ And that’s what we wanted to do.”

In 1976, the California Legislature issued the following resolution:

> “WHEREAS, The Reverend Jim Jones, an officially ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination, has been pastor of his church, the Peoples Temple in Redwood Valley, for 25 years; and
>
> WHEREAS, The Reverend Jim Jones, whose steadfast support of the Constitution and encouragement of responsible citizenship have led to his serving with acclaim in many civic posts, travels

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many hundreds of miles each week to minister the three Peoples Temple churches in Redwood Valley, Los Angeles, and San Francisco; and

WHEREAS, He and the Peoples Temple have extended financial and other kinds of support to the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood and Health Clinic in the Bay Area, the American Cancer Society, the Mendocino County Heart Association and other medical research and testing programs, KQED and other educational broadcasting stations, Big Brothers of America, anti-hunger groups throughout the world, Indian relief, city schools, hospital development, and to the family of a slain highway patrolman in the Fresno area; and

WHEREAS, Pastor Jones ministry is concerned not only with helping to meet the needs of those who are disadvantaged, but also with identifying the causes of those needs so that they might be eradicated from our society; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED BY THE SENATE RULES COMMITTEE, That the Members commend the Reverend Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple for their exemplary display of diligent and devoted service to and concern for their fellow man, not only in this state and nation, but throughout the world…”

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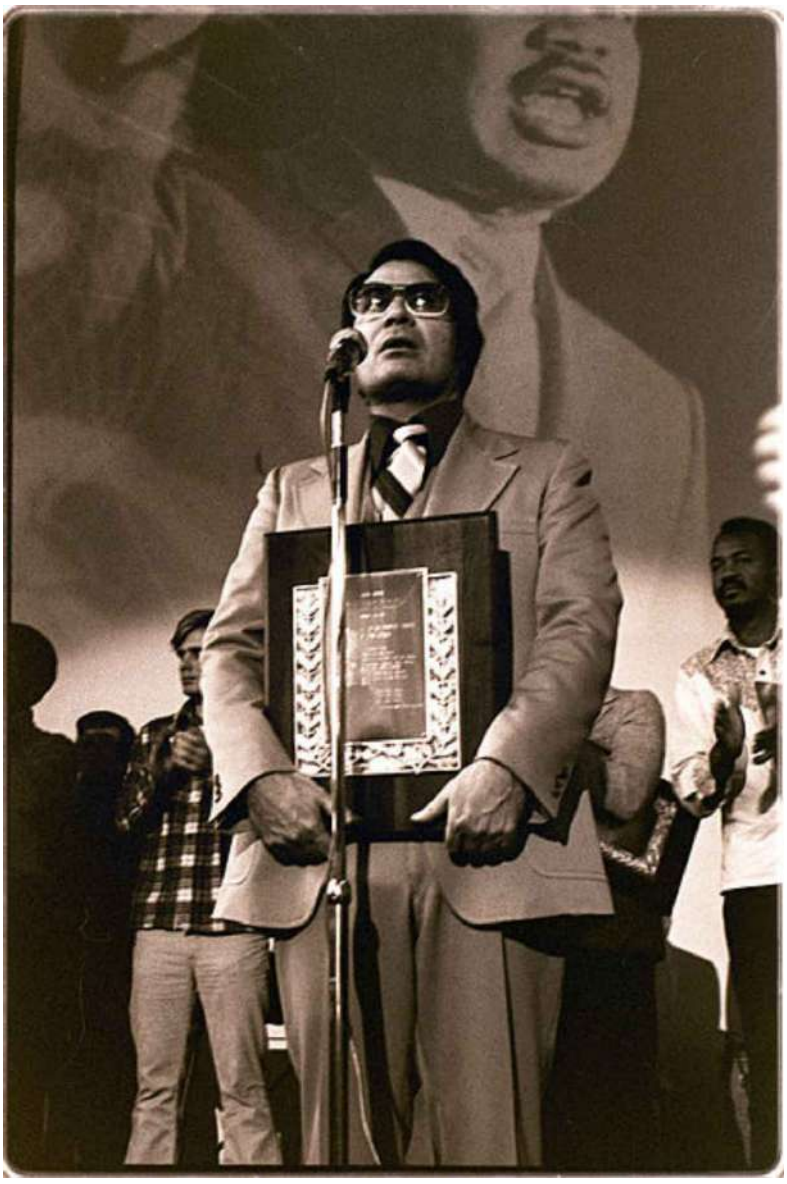

Nancy Wong's picture of Jones receiving a Martin Luther King, Jr. award from Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco in January 1977

However, this political popularity came with a price, one that took a heavy toll on Jones' already fragile psyche and in some ways undermined some of his teachings. Gosney continued, "Jim Jones represented the Peoples Temple as a progressive movement that was threatened. That there were outside forces who didn't want us to do what we were doing. And it was the government. The government was infiltrating and wiretapping and trying to kill people or assassinate people. That's what was happening. … There was always threats. Always, always, always, always threats. They were there.

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They were just about to try to destroy us if we weren't always [vigilant] about our movement. There was a fire in the San Francisco Temple. The Temple was burned down and had to be rebuilt. The fire proved they are out to get us. They so don't want us to do what we're doing; they've burned down the Temple. They'll do anything to keep us from doing what we're doing. So we have to be even stronger."

In his paranoid state of mind, Jones became convinced that he was never going to enjoy the absolute control over people that he longed for while he remained in the United States. He also claimed that he and his people were in danger: "What about the fact that the Ku Klux Klan has increased one hundred times in its membership? Where? Not Mississippi, I'm talking about New York State. It's the church's duty to have a place of protection for its people."

As a result of these and other concerns, Jones began to look for somewhere else to move the Peoples Temple, and he found such a place in the South American country of Guyana. Laura Kohl described what happened while Jones and others sought a new place for the group: "December of '75, ninety of us went by plane, into Guyana, and saw where we were building the community there. … We thought of ourselves as one big family that did handle our own discipline. I was in a lot of the meetings where people were spanked or beaten, and I was slapped once, also in a public meeting. … In one planning commission meeting, Jim was getting notes — kind of love notes — from one of the members on the planning commission."

Those who went to Guyana that day believed they were going to be building a heaven on earth. The jungle, many said, was beautiful and pristine, an untouched Eden in the middle of what Jones' followers believed was a very tainted world. Thus, they looked around and reported back about a new type of Promised Land, this one in a rain forest instead of a desert. Mike Touchette, a member at the time, discussed what the land that became Jonestown was like before the move: "When I first went into Jonestown, it was just a footpath in the rainforest. We had Indians in front of us with machetes, and we had Indians behind us with machetes. Three-hundred miles into the jungle, we literally built a city in the middle of the jungle, in the middle of nowhere." In a taped message sent back to the United States, a smiling Touchette was seen saying, "Hello family. It's been a — it's such a

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joy and great pleasure being here, because of Father's love. We are trying to make — and we are making a place of refuge for all of you here. There is no — nothing at all that I would — that I have any holdings here. I do not want to go back in any way, shape or form to the States. I love it here and this is the place where all of you are going to be."

Meanwhile, back in America, the Peoples Temple was devolving for some into something of a hell on earth. Stanley Clayton later mentioned how he earned scorn for various reasons: "There wasn't a week that went by that I wasn't called up on the floor because of my behavior, because of my attitude. 'Stanley Clayton, up, front, center.' … You might fight five people in one night. Well, you know, you're very tired! I've seen situations where they actually knocked the person out and actually took water and threw water back on him, woke him up, and whooped him some more." For Neva Hargrave, at least, this mistreatment might have saved her life: "I had welts really bad, and when I went to work the next day, one of my employees noticed the welts when I sat down. And I just broke down and told her. She didn't even know I was Peoples Temple. And she called the manager of the station up and they talked to me about leaving. I couldn't say goodbye to my son or my husband because at that point, it was like the Gestapo — the families were turning on each other. If I had said goodbye, one of them would have reported me."

As these types of issues became more commonplace, members began to leave, and fearful of retribution, they would slip away secretly to places where Jones and his people could not find them. Some of them banded together and, along with family members of those still inside, decided to approach the press. Marshall Kilduff, the journalist to whom they spoke, decided to pursue the story but found it hard to get to the truth, He later said, "The sheer staginess, the controlled atmosphere that sort of enclosed this guy, made him so unusual, so different than the norm, that it made me very curious. My biggest problem was getting somebody to sort of talk to me about the Church in kind of conversational terms. … I finally heard from some ex-members who heard I was interested in writing a story about the Temple for New West magazine, and they took a chance. They called me and some of them said, you know, "You don't know nothing about the Church. Wait until I tell you what I went through."

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The story that Kilduff wrote proved to mark a turning point for the members of the Peoples Temple. As Layton explained, “Before the article was going to break, Jim convinced the publisher that she needed to read it to him. He was on one phone and I was on — taping the other end of it, while somebody else listened on another one. Jim didn’t understand that there was no way he could talk her down from whatever this article was going to say. And as she continues to read this article, he’s looking around the room at about five of us and you could tell that he’s becoming more and more anxious and as — and you know, his mouth becomes dryer and dryer. And he realizes that this article is going to be hugely damning, and it was midway through it he mouths to all of us in the room, ‘We’re leaving tonight.’ They flew out to Guyana, six hours before that article was going to hit.”

Those who stayed behind in America lived to tell their tale, but most of those who left that day would have a far different fate. At first, however, it seemed that Guyana truly was a paradise. Tim Carter was shown on videotape saying, “I have never been so totally happy or fulfilled in my life. I can’t begin to describe it. You could sit here and talk all day long and no words could describe the peace, the beauty, the sense of accomplishment and responsibility and camaraderie that’s here. It’s overwhelming, it really is. You can’t describe it.”

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Pictures of Jonestown owned by the Jonestown Institute

The Temple's building in Georgetown, Guyana

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While those who moved to what was soon called Jonestown may have thought that they were at peace, there was certainly no peace of mind for those left behind. Eugene Smith later recalled, “My wife had gone over three months prior. And I was waiting on pins and needles, and I was talking to her probably twice a week on the hand radio and Leona Collier came up, ‘Ok, Eugene it’s your time, you’re going over.’ Coming into Jonestown, you see a guard at the front gate and you’re all excited, you’re going down this road. The trailer comes to a stop and then you can see the wooden pathway that leads to the pavilion. And you’re just — you want to run, but you know, you just try — ‘Alright I’m gonna be cool.’ And just as you reach the edge of the pavilion, people started rushing you that you knew. My wife was there. Haven’t seen my mother in over a year or so. And I’m just hugging people and it’s just — it’s like, I have arrived and everything is going to be okay now. … When Jim Jones wasn’t there, things tended to be a little bit lighter. You know, people would be dancing or singing. There would be music in different cottages. But when Jones was present, it was very, very dark. It was almost like a dark cloud.”

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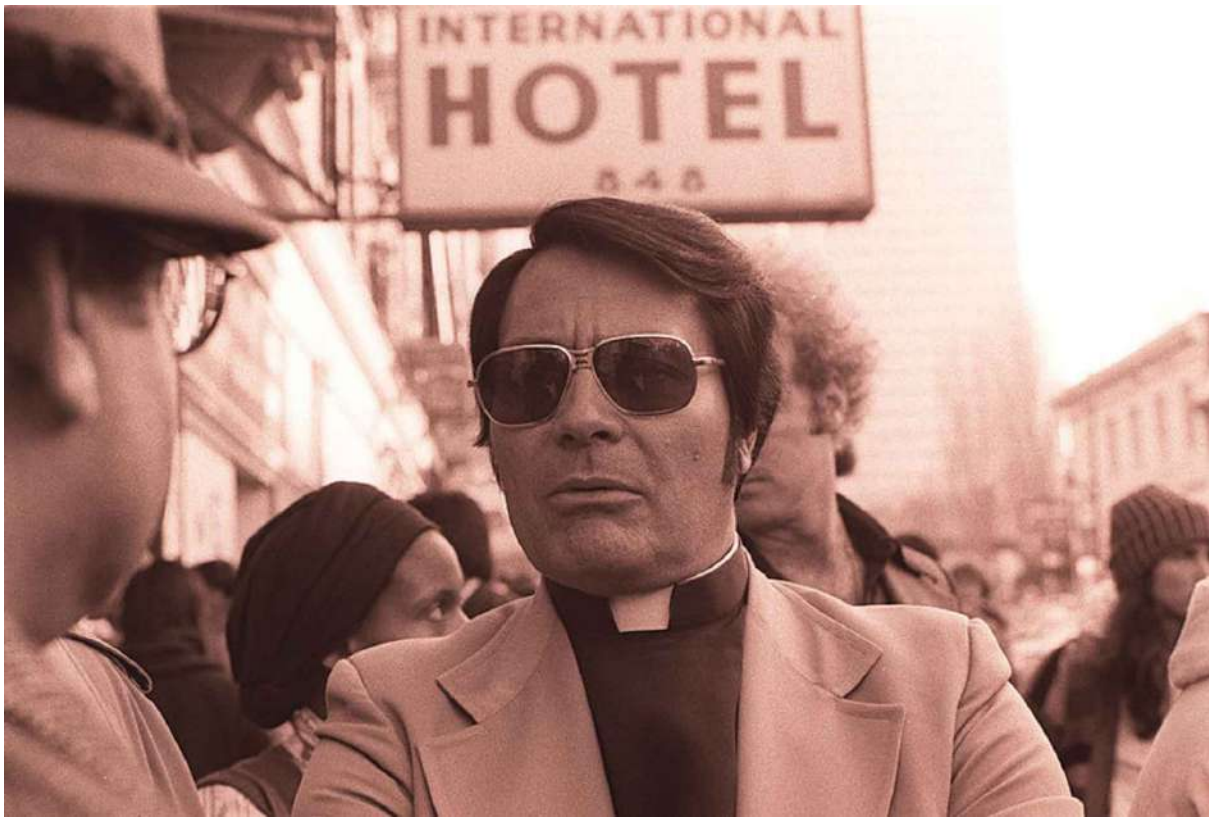

Nancy Wong's pictures of Jones at a protest in San Francisco in 1977

While most people got out in the first wave, others took longer to be authorized by Jones to make the trip. Edith Roller arrived in late January 1978 and soon learned that things had to be done a certain way in the camp and those involved were expected to do as they were told. She wrote, "A contretemps took place over shrimp cleaning. Jewel Wilson disapproves of the way Davis and I had done it yesterday and so we had to do it over. She also objected to several other things we were doing; every miniscule point was the object of her scrutiny. Several other people were occupied with cleaning a new batch and Jewel objected to various elements of the operation. The Simon twins joined us reluctantly and complained, as I later learned, because Bobby Stroud was not required to help. The result was a meeting called by Sharon Amos. She explained that all the permanent residents had assigned jobs. Bobby Stroud and Joan Pursley walk all over town raising money for the cause, as much as $300 a day. Terry Carter is on the radio most of the time. Tim Swinney was at customs with the foreign minister trying to get our crates out of customs. Evelyn LeRoy Eichler drives a car. Richard Janaro is working in procurement. All are effective and hard

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working. The Simon twins and anyone else who complained was rebuked while Jewel was praised for jumping in and working so vigorously in the kitchen. It did not seem to be the time to say that I won't object to working if every move I made was not criticized. I cleaned more shrimps, though with some help, but Jewel did not miss a chance to point out the slightest error I made."

A picture of Terry Carter, who died at Jonestown at the age of 24

Those who had fled the cult and those who had family members in Guyana were desperate to see Jones exposed for what he was and to get their loved ones out. Rebecca Moore discussed the efforts of the group, known as the Concerned Relatives: "The Concerned Relatives prompted [an] FCC investigation of Peoples Temple. They organized letter-writing campaigns to public officials, to members of Congress. They were incredibly effective in mobilizing government and media interest in Peoples Temple." Unfortunately, this would prove to be the kind of pressure that Jones utilized in propagating the impending tragedy.

Meanwhile, in Guyana, Jones was involved in an all-out public relations campaign on behalf of his new settlement. In one pamphlet, he wrote,

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"Today the population of Jonestown approaches 1,500. Hundreds of acres teem with crops, some native, some newly introduced. Seedlings and young fruit trees are started in a nursery; scientific methods and testing, and advice from local Amerindians and Guyanese government agricultural experts is proving to be a very good combination, as season follows productive season. Lush pastures support the growing herds of swine and dairy cattle. Thousands of chickens thrive in sanitary housing and modern incubators. Several horses are enjoyed by all the children, and are used for light hauling as well."

Still, there were problems, as Kohl recalled, "Over the summer of 1978, all of us noticed that Jim was — seemed to be getting sicker. His harangues over the loudspeaker were getting more and more frantic, and really just sounding more and more insane." One of the tapes discovered in the wake of the mass murder-suicide bore this out, including the following exchange between Jones and two unknown members.

> Woman: "He said, "I really want to get away from him. By Christmas, I will be gone."
>
> Jones: "By Christmas, do you want to be gone? By Christmas, do you want to be gone?! By Christmas, do you want to be gone?!!"
>
> Man: "I would ask you, could I go home and make a trip to see my people?"
>
> Jones: "I have the power to send you home by Christmas, but it's not on Transworld Airlines. It's blasphemy! It's blasphemy to talk about going back when you have not been given any approval! Do you want to go home?"
>
> Man: "No."
>
> Jones: "Well, then be seated and shut your mouth and don't be in my face anymore."

Jones also lashed out against the numerous public articles being written about him and the Peoples Temple, and in the summer of 1978, one of his people sent the following editorial to the *San Francisco Sun-Reporter*.

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Published on June 15, it defended the group's leader: "Despite the fact that Jim Jones has temporarily departed the California scene to begin another career in Guyana, there are former members of Peoples Temple who still would do him physical harm or use the courts to destroy him. Jones, the sociologist who has used Christianity to aid him in helping those of the human race who need help, was under constant attack by those who have followed a program of hypocrisy in their everyday relations with their fellow men. … There are many persons who find it difficult to find their particular niche in life, and such people are in dire need of assistance to find the niche that best suits their needs. The majority of niche seekers are looking for what can best be described as a utopia, and those who went to Jones were not free of thoughts or searching for a land of milk and honey. Some of those who did not find their utopia fell away and began to launch bitter attacks upon Jones, which fact was not ignored by a number of publications in the state of California. These publications immediately began to print lurid stories picturing Jones as a charlatan of the first degree – an individual who claimed super healing powers, an individual who through devious means acquired property and money from some of those who went to him in search of utopia. Jones was also charged with possessing powers of persuasion so great that many of the persons within the organization had abandoned their families to follow Jones."

Of course, according to the author, all these accusations were lies and Jones was actually a great leader carving out a new Eden in the jungle: "Where Jones led his great trek in Guyana is an area that is a virtual jungle, there before the American pioneers led by Jones disembarked from a boat and hacked out a road through the heavily forested terrain to a designated spot. More trees and other shrubbery had to be cut and burned before the settlers could erect their first buildings. Now the cleared area is known as Jonestown, and there are perhaps more than 2,000 people. There are some people with medical skills and other skills mat mankind has felt so essential for survival. Among the new pioneers were several hundred young persons, some of whom left home to go abroad with the permission of their legal guardians. Some of the onetime legal guardians, some of whom are parents of the young persons in the new settlement in Guyana, have been making rumbles that Jones is a person who should be charged with kidnapping.

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Furthermore, the allegations are made that, even if Jones did not kidnap any of these persons, he is holding them in Guyana against their wills and that in fact the persons held would be only too happy to rejoin their onetime legal guardians or relatives if they could."

This rosy depiction was in stark contrast to some of the measures Jones took to prevent members from leaving Jonestown. On October 17, a month before the mass murder-suicide, Jones told his followers, "The Guyana Defense Force [GDF] advised us to shoot anyone who runs away in the legs. If the GDF finds you in government areas (and much of this land is government-owned forbidden land), they will not only shoot you in the legs, they will shoot you in the heart because they don't know what you are up to. We have the option to call GDF and they will gather around and move in with their army and surround the whole area and they will catch them. After they catch them, they will take them away. We have been advised that we can stop them with a bow and arrow or whatever is necessary to stop them, including a shotgun or rifle. We will no longer use our workforce to search for runaways. The next person that runs off is on his own. We are calling the authorities. The minister of Internal Affairs, Dr. [Vibert] Mingo, is a personal friend of mine. The head of the Guyanese National Service is a personal friend of mine. We're a friend of the Commissioner of Police. … If you try to cross the border you'll get shot from either side. It [is] illegal to cross that border. Just face some facts and grow up."

The Jonestown Institute's picture of Jones and other members at Jonestown

Don't Expect to Live

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"I am 24 years of age right now and don't expect to live through the end of this book. I thought I should at least make some attempt to let the world know what Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple is — OR WAS — all about. …JONESTOWN — the most peaceful, loving community that ever existed, JIM JONES — the one who made this paradise possible — much to the contrary of the lies stated about Jim Jones being a power-hungry sadistic, mean person who thought he was God — of all things. … There were no ugly, mean police waiting to beat our heads in, no more racist stares from whites and others who thought they were better. No one was made fun of for their appearance — something each one had no control over. … What a beautiful place this was. The children loved the jungle, learned about animals and plants. There were no cars to run over them; no child-molesters to molest them; nobody to hurt them. They were the freest, most intelligent children I had ever known. … Seniors had dignity. They had whatever they wanted — a plot of land for a garden. Seniors were treated with respect — something they never had in the United States. A rare few were sick, and when they were, they were given the best medical care… We died because you would not let us live in peace!" - Annie Moore, November 18, 1978

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Jonestown Institute's picture of Annie Moore (left)

Back in Washington, California Congressman Leo Ryan was concerned over what he was hearing about Americans possibly being held against their will at Jonestown, so he decided to go to Guyana in November 1978 and investigate the situation for himself. Jackie Speier, one of the aides who accompanied him, later admitted, "I was very fearful about making the trip. I had a copy of the Congressman's will and placed it in a particular drawer in my desk, just in case."

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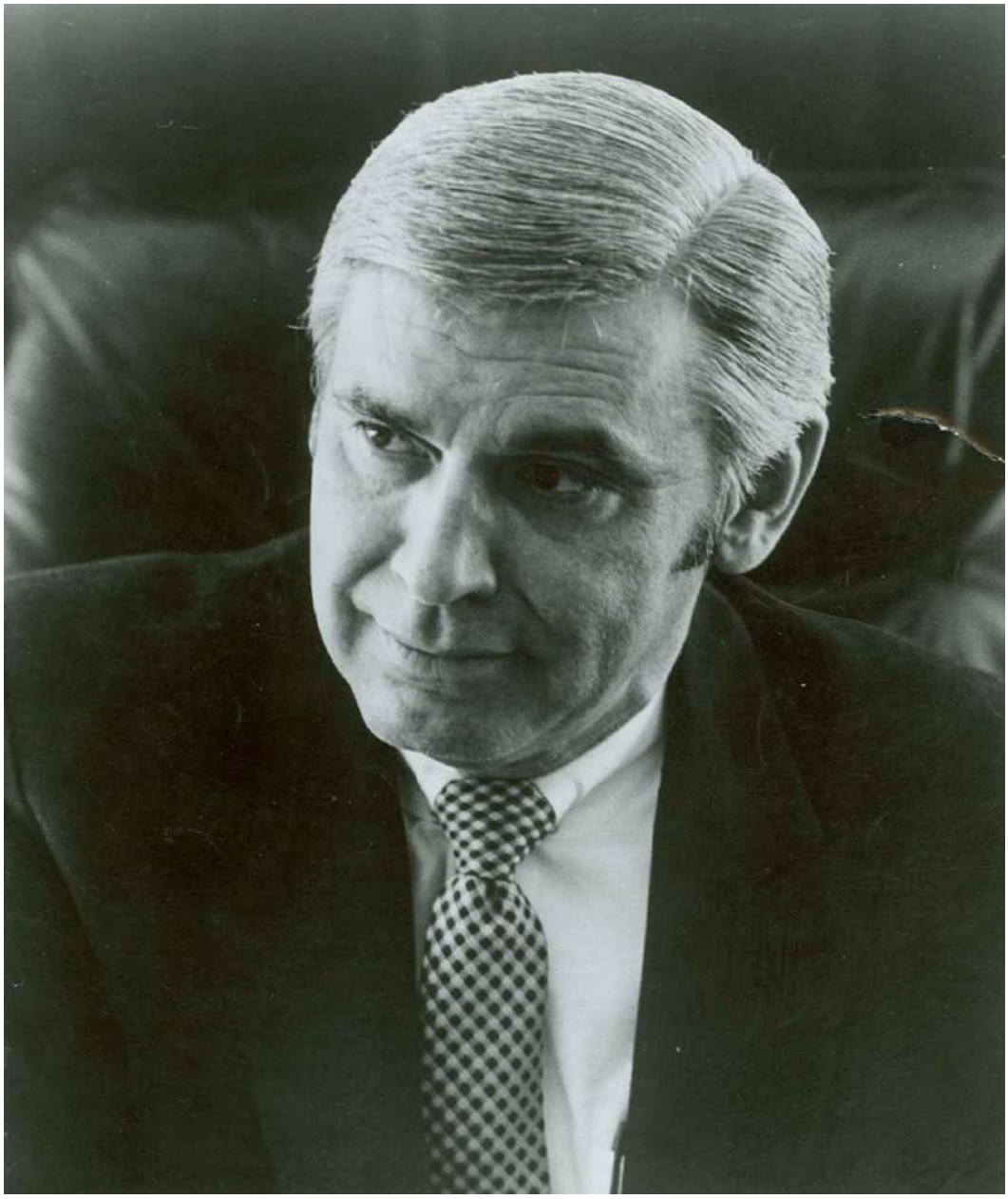

Ryan

However, once Ryan and his team got there, all seemed well. The same aide noted, “How could you not be impressed that out of the jungles of Guyana, they had carved out a community? They had crops growing. They had cabins. They had a little medical clinic, a little daycare area.” However, a fateful piece of tape recorded Jones giving them a tour and saying, “Flour, rice, black-eyed peas, more peas. We have different containers surrounding

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the place — we couldn't go through all of the tremendous inventory they built up. Kool-aid…"

In reality, when Leo Ryan had arrived in Guyana on November 17, 1978, he found a scene carefully staged for his enjoyment and to impress on him the idea that all was well in the compound. In some of his last recorded remarks, he said, "I think that all of you know that I am here to find out more about — questions have been raised about your operation here. And I can tell you right now, that from the few conversations I've had with some of the folks here already this evening, that whatever these comments are — there are some people here who believe that this is the best thing they've ever had in their whole lives." Jackie Speier would admit to being completely caught off-guard by the coming turn of events: "It was a vibrant community. I would never have imagined that twenty-four hours later, those people would be dead. … Don Harris, who was the NBC reporter, came up to me and Congressman Ryan and handed us these two notes from people that wanted to leave. So at that point, we knew that something was very, very wrong."

As her last statement suggests, the dark underbelly remained, as did those desperate to get out of Jonestown. Gosney explained, "When Congressman Ryan came, I wanted to pass him a note that said, 'Help us get out of Jonestown.' When one of the reporters was walking around toward the edge of the pavilion, I stuck the note in the fold of his arm and it fell to the ground. And so I picked up the note and I — and I gave it back to him. I said, 'You dropped something,' and this little boy, about nine years old, started saying, 'He passed a note! He passed a note!' … [Later] Jim Jones came to talk to me and the first thing he said was, 'Don't say anything to the reporters. They're all liars.' The last words I heard from Jim Jones was, 'I just want you to know that you can come back to Jonestown and visit your son any time you want.'"

The following morning, November 18, there was yet another staged interview in which people described themselves as exceedingly happy to be at Jonestown, but then, something startling happened. According to Carter, "Literally, out of nowhere, this storm came blowing in. The sky turned black. The wind came up and it just — torrential rain. But what I personally felt was that evil itself blew into Jonestown. It was about 11:30 in the morning. Edith Parks walked up to Jackie Speier and said, 'I'm being held prisoner

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here, I want to go home.' Immediately, the whole vibe changed. I mean this reporter said, 'We got our story.' You know, 'The story's here. It's happening right now.'"

When the reporter asked Jones about the notes, he insisted, "People play games, friend. They lie. They lie. What can I do about liars? Are you people going to — leave us. I just beg you, please leave us. Bill, we will bother nobody. Anybody wants to get out of here, can get out of here. They have no problem about getting out of here. They come and go all the time. I don't know what kind of games people like. Who — people like publicity. Some people do. I don't. But some people like publicity. But if it's so damned bad, why is he leaving his son here? Can you give me a good reason for that?"

At this point, in Speier's recollection, "All hell broke out," and Tim Carter described the moment it became clear November 18 would be a day of pandemonium: "Congressman Ryan was directly across from me, and I saw this Temple member [Don 'Ujara' Sly] walk up behind him — and he was actually crying and shaking — and all of a sudden, he pulled out this knife and said, 'All right…you're gonna die.' We all jumped on him, and there were just screams of horror everywhere. … I went back to my cottage. All I wanted to do was see my wife and my son. Gloria and I were laid down on the cot and we just held each other and I said, 'You know, I think we may all die.' And she said — she kind of looked at me and then she looked down at our son, who was playing on the floor with the toys, and she said, 'You're scaring him.' I had literally opened my mouth to say we need to leave, when there was an announcement on the loud speaker — 'Will everybody report to the pavilion for a meeting.'" In reference to the attack on Ryan, Tim Reiterman, a journalist at the scene, remembered, "Those of us in the news media viewed Congressman Ryan as a form of protection, a shield of the United States. What happened there in those few moments made it clear that nobody was safe."

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Sly

Having narrowly avoided being stabbed, Ryan and his entourage wisely decided it was time to leave instead of deal with the ramifications of that altercation, so they made their way to an airstrip to leave. Unfortunately, it was too late for them. Stephen Sung, a sound technician sent to cover the trip, described what happened next: “We drove back to the airstrip, Port Kaituma. All of a sudden, we saw a dump truck from far away arriving to this airstrip. We realized these people catch up from people from Jim Jones, they’re very close lieutenant to Jim Jones. These three guys, they get off the truck and walk around this area as though they were looking for somebody. They looked in people’s faces. They stared at us for a little bit, but they didn’t say one word. They didn’t ask anything. Right away, they walked back to the truck. They drove this truck all the way across the airstrip and stop on this side of the plane, so literally they cut us off from the jungle. We never know there’s people hidden inside the dump truck. The moment it stopped, they start shooting right away. Everybody ran toward the plane, on this side of plane. They try to hide underneath the wheels. … All you can hear is the gun — pop, pop, pop — goes off constantly. We lie flat on the tarmac at that moment. But shortly afterwards, I heard my partner, the cameraman. He yelled, ‘Oh shit.’ He said he got — he got shot. He was

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sitting up. … I felt a tremendous explosion, right next to my head. I got a tremendous pain ran through my arm and on my shoulder. I was really shaking, but I didn't move. I took the pain and hold still. … The gun's dead and all we can hear — this one engine was still running. So all you could hear the engine noise. And that's it."

The shootout at the airstrip left five dead, including Congressman Ryan, but there was a much larger tragedy taking place back at the compound. Tim Carter explained what was going on at the impromptu meeting: "We walked up to the pavilion together, with everybody else. It was very quiet. It was very somber. It was very sad, but it wasn't a death march. … Maria Katsaris walked up to [Jones] and whispered in his ear, and he looked at her and said, 'Is there any way to make it taste less bitter?' And she said, 'No, no apparently not.' And he said, 'Is it quick?' And she said, 'Yeah, it's supposed to be quick.' … That's when I noticed that there were armed guards that had kind of taken positions up around the pavilion. I'm thinking, 'Where did all of these f****** guns come from?'"

Jonestown Institute's picture of Maria Katsaris

Having gathered his people together at the pavilion, Jones began to discuss the plan to commit mass suicide and attempted to persuade those who were hesitant. Much of the meeting was caught on the infamous Jonestown "death

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tape," during which Jones announced, "How very much I've tried my best to give you a good life. But in spite of all of my trying a handful of our people, with their lies, have made our lives impossible. There's no way to detach ourselves from what's happened today. Not only are we in a compound situation, not only are there those who have left and committed the betrayal of the century, some have stolen children from others, and they are in pursuit right now to kill them because they stole their children. And we are sitting here waiting on a powder keg. I don't think it is what we want to do with our babies--I don't think that's what we had in mind to do with our babies. It is said by the greatest of prophets from time immemorial: "No man may take my life from me; I lay my life down." So to sit here and wait for the catastrophe that's going to happen on that airplane--it's going to be a catastrophe. It almost happened here. Almost happened when the congressman was nearly killed here. You can't steal people's children. You can't take off with people's children without expecting a violent reaction. And that's not so unfamiliar to us either--even if we were Judeo-Christian--if we weren't Communists. The world suffers violence, and the violent shall take it by force. If we can't live in peace, then let's die in peace."

Jones was met with a lot of applause, but throughout the meeting, children were crying, and at least one member, Christine Miller, countered Jones' assertions by asking whether other alternatives, such as fleeing to Russia, was possible. When Miller quoted Jones himself by saying "as long as there's life, there's hope," Jones shot back, "Well--some--everybody dies. Some place that hope runs out because everybody dies. I haven't seen anybody yet didn't die. And I'd like to choose my own kind of death for a change. I'm tired of being tormented to hell, that's what I'm tired of. Tired of it. I have twelve hundred people's lives in my hands, and I certainly don't want your life in my hands. I'm going to tell you, Christine, without me, life has no meaning. I'm the best thing you'll ever have…Maybe the next time you'll get to go to Russia. The next time round…what I'm talking about now is the dispensation of judgment. This is a revolutionary--a revolutionary suicide council. I'm not talking about self-destruction."

After that exchange, Miller made a plea on behalf of the children, telling Jones, "I look about at the babies and I think they deserve to live, you know?" Jones replied, "I agree. But also they deserve much more; they

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deserve peace… I tried to give it to you. I've laid down my life, practically. I've practically died every day to give you peace. And you still not have any peace. You look better than I've seen you in a long while, but it's still not the kind of peace that I want to give you. A person's a fool who continues to say that they're winning when you're losing."

Conversely, many others spoke admiringly of Jones during the meeting and heartily endorsed suicide, such as Jim McElvane, who addressed Miller: "Christine, you're only standing here because he was here in the first place. So I don't know what you're talking about, having an individual life. Your life has been extended to the day that you're standing there because of him." In fact, McElvane played a crucial role in attempting to make sure the followers eventually drank the poison: "It might make a lot of you feel a little more comfortable. Sit down and be quiet, please. One of the things I used to do--I used to be a therapist. And the kind of therapy that I did had to do with reincarnations in past life situations. And every time anybody had the experience of going into a past life, I was fortunate enough through Father to be able to let them experience it all the way through their death, so to speak. And everybody was so happy when they made that step to the other side… It feels good. It never felt so good. Now, may I tell you. You've never felt so good as how that feels."

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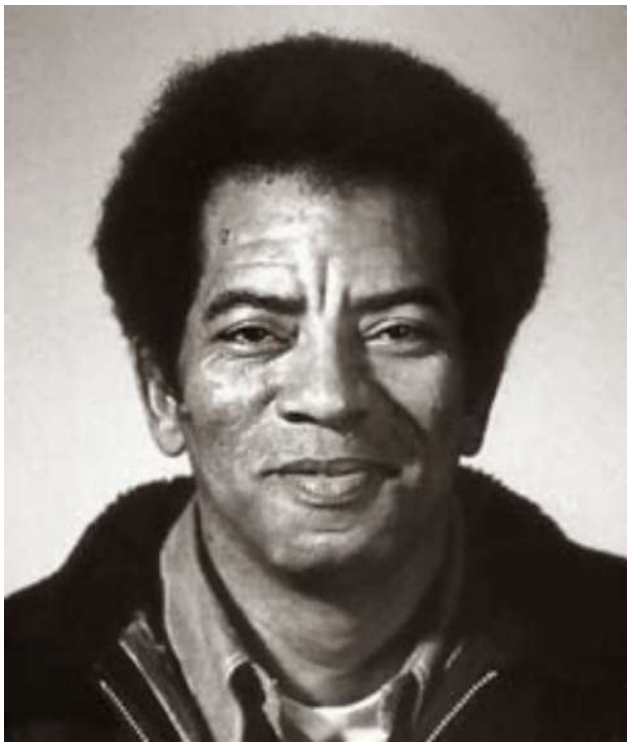

McElvane

One unidentified woman praised Jones during the meeting: “I just want to say something for everyone that I see that is standing around or crying. This is nothing to cry about. This is something we could all rejoice about. We could be happy about this. They always told us that we could cry when you're coming into this world. So we're leaving it, and we're leaving it peaceful. I think we should be happy about this. I was just thinking about Jim Jones. He just has suffered and suffered and suffered. We have the honor guard, and we don't even have a chance to ... I want to give him one more chance. That's few that's gone. There's many more here. That's not all of us. That's not all yet. That's just a few that have died. I tried to get to the one that--there's a kid. I'm looking at so many people crying. I wish you would not cry. And just thank Father. I've been here about one year and nine months. And I never felt better in my life. Not in San Francisco. But until I came to Jonestown. I had a very good life. I had a beautiful life. I don't see nothing that I could be sorry about. We should be happy. At least I am.”

One unidentified man echoed those sentiments: “A great deal because it's Jim Jones. And the way the children are laying there now. I'd rather see them lay like that than to see them have to die like the Jews did, which was pitiful

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anyhow. And I just like to thank Dad for giving us life and also death. And I appreciate the fact of the way our children are going. Because, like Dad said, when they come in, what they're gonna do to our children--they're gonna massacre our children. And also the ones that they take capture, they're gonna just let them grow up and be dummies like they want them to be. And not grow up to be a person like the one and only Jim Jones. So I'd like to thank Dad for the opportunity for letting Jonestown be not what it could be, but what Jonestown is. Thank you, Dad."

As the cyanide-laced drinks began to be passed around, a frenzy of excitement, despair and insanity broke out, egged on by Jones, who continued to exhort his followers: "I, with respect, die with a degree of dignity. Lay down your life with dignity. Don't lay down with tears and agony. There's nothing to death. It's like [McElvane] said, it's just stepping over to another plane. Don't be this way. Stop this hysterics. This is not the way for people who are Socialists or Communists to die. No way for us to die. We must die with some dignity. We must die with some dignity. We will have no choice. Now we have some choice. Do you think they're gonna allow this to be done--allow us to get by with this? You must be insane. Look children, it's just something to put you to rest. Oh, God. Mother, Mother, Mother, Mother, Mother, please. Mother, please, please, please. Don't--don't do this. Don't do this. Lay down your life with your child. But don't do this."

As children kept crying and some members continued to pledge their loyalty to Jones and professed their wish to die, Jones said, "Keep your emotions down. Keep your emotions down. Children, it will not hurt…if you'll be quiet. It's never been done before, you say. It's been done by every tribe in history. Every tribe facing annihilation. All the Indians of the Amazon are doing it right now. They refuse to bring any babies into the world. They kill every child that comes into the world. Because they don't want to live in this kind of a world. So be patient. Be patient. Death is--I tell you, I don't care how many screams you hear. I don't care how many anguished cries. Death is a million times preferable to ten more days of this life. If you knew what was ahead of you--if you knew what was ahead of you, you'd be glad to be stepping over tonight. Death, death, death is common to people. And the Eskimos, they take death in their stride. Let's be

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dignified. If you quit tell them they're dying--if you adults would stop some of this nonsense. Adults, adults, adults. I call on you to stop this nonsense. I call on you to quit exciting your children when all they're doing is going to a quiet rest. I call on you to stop this now if you have any respect at all. Are we black, proud, and Socialist, or what are we? Now stop this nonsense. Don't carry this on anymore. You're exciting your children. No, no sorrow--that it's all over. I'm glad it's over. Hurry, hurry my children. Hurry. All I think (inaudible) from the hands of the enemy. Hurry, my children. Hurry. There are seniors out here that I'm concerned about. Hurry. I don't want to leave my seniors to this mess. Only quickly, quickly, quickly, quickly, quickly.... Good knowing you. No more pain now. No more pain, I said…All we're doing is laying down our lives. We're not letting them take our lives. We're laying down our lives. Peace in their lives. They just want peace."

In the final remarks he made on the audio of the meeting, Jones claimed to be setting an example for others to follow: "Don't, don't fail to follow my advice. You'll be sorry. You'll be sorry. If we do it, than that they do it. Have trust. You have to step across. We used to think this world was--this world was not our home--well, it sure isn't--we were saying--it sure wasn't. He doesn't want to tell them. All he's doing--if they will tell them-- assure these kids. Can't some people assure these children of the relaxation of stepping over to the next plane? They set an example for others. We said --one thousand people who said, we don't like the way the world is… Take our life from us. We laid it down. We got tired. We didn't commit suicide, we committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world."

The massacre that took place during this time continues to be controversial as people debate how many wanted to die, how many willingly drank poison, and how many (if any) were injected with poison and/or shot. Tim Carter described the scene: "As I walked up to the back of the pavilion, I saw a woman name Rosie on the ground crying, holding her dead baby. There were maybe eight or nine other people who were dying, or in the process of dying. Inside, I just wanted things to stop. Please, just let me catch my breath; let me figure out what's happening here. I looked to my right and I saw my wife, with our son in her arms and poison being injected into his mouth. My son was dead and he was frothing at the mouth. You know,

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cyanide makes people froth at the mouth. My wife died in my arms and my dead baby son was in her arms. And I held her and said, ‘I love you, I love you,’ because it’s all I could say. She died in my arms, man.”

Another member, Stanley Clayton, reported, “There was a young kid, his name was Thurman and when he came inside, he bumped into me. At that same time, he’s falling to the ground and he’s going into convulsion. I grabbed the kid from the shoulders up, and in that process of taking him out of the pavilion, this kid died in my arms. I mean, I just felt the life go out of him. To me — at that point, I knew that this [expletive] was real. … I ain’t never used the term ‘suicide,’ and I’m not gonna never use the term ‘suicide.’ That man killed — was killing us. … My wife came up to me, she didn’t have no tears in her eyes. She just was — was just in a daze. ‘My mother, my grandmother, my sister, my brother, they gone.’ You know she said, ‘Just take me. Just take me and just lay me down next to my grandmamma.’ And she went up to that Kool-Aid, to that death barrel and she just, I mean — didn’t hesitate, just took it and drunk it and then told me to hold her, to take her, and I did. And she died in my arms. And once I laid her down and she told me how she wanted to lay with her grandmother, I — at that point, knew that I didn’t have no reason to be here no more.”

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A picture of bodies around Jonestown

A picture of military personnel transporting the dead bodies

In all, over 900 members of the Peoples Temple died that day, including Jim Jones, who was found with a gunshot wound to the head. 88 of the members were not at Jonestown at the time, including some who had taken

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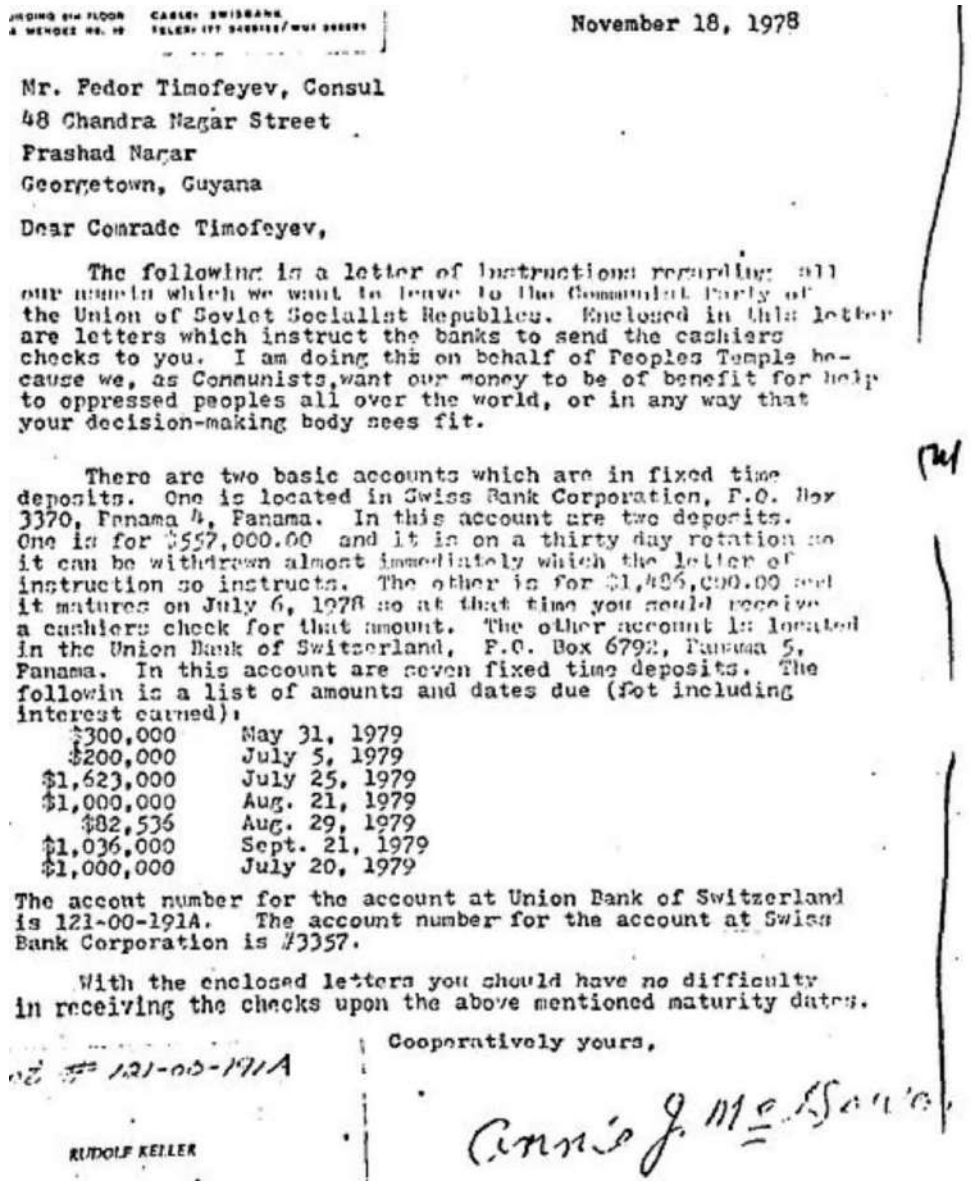
part in the assassination of Congressman Ryan and others who had been instructed to distribute the dead members' assets in the way the group wanted, such as to the Soviet Union.



November 18, 1978

Mr. Fedor Timofeyev, Consul
48 Chandra Nagar Street
Prashad Nagar
Georgetown, Guyana

Dear Comrade Timofeyev,

The following is a letter of instructions regarding all our assets in which we want to leave to the Communist Party of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Enclosed in this letter are letters which instruct the banks to send the cashiers checks to you. I am doing this on behalf of Peoples Temple because we, as Communists, want our money to be of benefit for help to oppressed peoples all over the world, or in any way that your decision-making body sees fit.

There are two basic accounts which are in fixed time deposits. One is located in Swiss Bank Corporation, P.O. Box 3370, Panama 4, Panama. In this account are two deposits. One is for $557,000.00 and it is on a thirty day rotation so it can be withdrawn almost immediately which the letter of instruction so instructs. The other is for $1,496,000.00 and it matures on July 6, 1978 so at that time you could receive a cashiers check for that amount. The other account is located in the Union Bank of Switzerland, P.O. Box 6792, Panama 5, Panama. In this account are seven fixed time deposits. The followin is a list of amounts and dates due (for including interest earned):

$300,000	May 31, 1979
$200,000	July 5, 1979
$1,623,000	July 25, 1979
$1,000,000	Aug. 21, 1979
$82,536	Aug. 29, 1979
$1,036,000	Sept. 21, 1979
$1,000,000	July 20, 1979

The accont number for the account at Union Bank of Switzerland is 121-00-191A. The account number for the account at Swiss Bank Corporation is #3357.

With the enclosed letters you should have no difficulty in receiving the checks upon the above mentioned maturity dates.

Cooperatively yours,

Re: # 121-00-191A

RUDOLF KEILER

Annie J. McSwine

A handful managed to flee into the jungle and live to tell the tale, and these survivors became a walking warning of the lethal combination of religious zeal and unlimited power. In the wake of the notorious massacre, *Time* covered the event with the headline "Cult of Death" and Congressman Ryan's daughter and others helped form the Cult Awareness Network, which aimed to peel people away from potentially dangerous cults. Larry Layton was the only member charged for a crime due to his participation in the

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shooting of Ryan; convicted of conspiracy and of aiding and abetting the murder of Ryan and the attempted murder of Richard Dwyer, he was paroled in 2002.

The Branch Davidians

I Got to Know David

"Back in 1990 I had been drumming in a local rock band. I needed some new sticks, and on the way to a gig stopped in at the music store. Seeing the sticks in my hand, two strangers introduced themselves and asked if I was in a band. The two were Koresh and Steve Schneider. Schneider gave me his card and I handed it back. The backside was full of Bible verses. 'You guys are a Christian band,' I said, uninterested. But after some small talk, I took the card back, and a few days later gave him a call. Over the next few weeks I hung out with Koresh and some other musicians in his band. I got to know David and was somewhat impressed. Having never paid much attention to the Bible, I was astonished to find that it actually did have some relevance to my life." - David Thibodeaux, one of the survivors

Prior to 1993, few people outside of Waco, Texas had heard of the Branch Davidians, and most of those who had wrote them off as just another strange religious cult. In fact, the group initially formed during the Great Depression as Shepherd's Rod after breaking off from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. When the cult's founder, Victor Houteff, died in 1955, the group expanded, moving to the Waco, Texas area. Benjamin Roden took over leadership of the group in 1959, and he remained in charge until he died, at which point his wife Lois took control. She groomed a young man named Vernon Howell to take her place. In 1984, the group split again and Howell moved with his people to Palestine, Texas, while the rest stayed in Waco with George Roden, Benjamin and Lois' son.

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Houteff

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Benjamin Roden

Lois Roden

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George Roden

Following Lois' death in January 1987, George Roden and Howell sparred over who should get possession of the Mount Carmel Center. According to a story published a few years later, "Roden dug up the body of Anna Hughes from the cemetery at Mount Carmel, storing the casket inside a shed. Roden then issued a challenge to Howell: the man who raised Hughes from the dead would be the Branch Davidians' true prophet. Howell and his followers asked the McLennan County Sheriff's Department to arrest Roden for corpse abuse. Officials demanded proof, such as a photograph of Hughes' body. Howell and seven men, all dressed in camouflage fatigues, sneaked into Mount Carmel on Nov. 3, 1987, supposedly to take such a photograph. They carried assault rifles. When daylight came, a shootout ensued. Deputies, notified by neighbors, broke up the skirmish. They filed charges of attempted murder against Howell and his followers. Although the Branch Davidians claimed to be carrying weapons for protection, they had put 18 bullet holes into the small tree Roden hid behind."

The trial was notorious and brought the Branch Davidians unwanted publicity that no doubt contributed to their downfall just a few years later.

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The story continued, “Howell's followers clogged the third floor of the McLennan County Courthouse for the trial. Most of the women wore dresses to their ankles and blouses buttoned up to their necks. They clamored around their men during breaks. Children clung tightly to their mothers. Roden, the prosecution's chief witness, came to the courtroom straight from the county jail, where he was serving a six-month sentence for filing legal motions asking God to inflict AIDS and herpes on Texas Supreme Court judges. Before the trial started, visiting Judge Herman Fitts asked if there were any witnesses in the courtroom who needed to be sworn in. No one arose. Howell's attorney Gary Coker intervened. He turned to Branch Davidians in the gallery, urging potential witnesses to stand. Again no one got up. Howell, smiling slightly, then stood. ‘It's all right,’ he said, raising a hand. ‘You've done nothing wrong. Stand.’ The doubt parted and the witnesses stood. In his testimony, Roden told of trying to raise Hughes from the dead and with not a hint of chagrin, admitted ending a prayer, ‘In the name of George B. Roden, amen.’ The jury acquitted Howell's followers. It could not reach a verdict on Howell. Charges against him were later dropped. With Roden in jail, the Branch Davidians settled back into Mount Carmel.”

Once back in Waco, Howell acted quickly to solidify authority over his followers by striking at the very heart of their personal lives with his “New Light” tapes, released on August 9, 1989. In them, he claimed that God had told him to take the women, even the married ones, of the group and have children with them. Meanwhile, their husbands would remain celibate.

Needless to say, this had the effect of separating the true believers from the rest. Howell went on to tell them, "Only the Lamb is to be given the job to raise up the seed of the House of David, isn't he? … You [women] have only one seen that can deliver you from death…There's only one hard-on in this whole universe that really loves you and wants to say good things about you. Remember Mary and God? Yeah? God couldn't make any advances because the world would misjudge. … If the Bible is true, then I'm Christ. But so what? Look at 2,000 years ago. What's so great about being Christ? A man nailed to the cross. A man of sorrow acquainted with grief. You know, being Christ ain't nothing. Know what I mean?…If the Bible is true, I'm Christ. If the Bible is true. But all I want out of this is for people to be honest this

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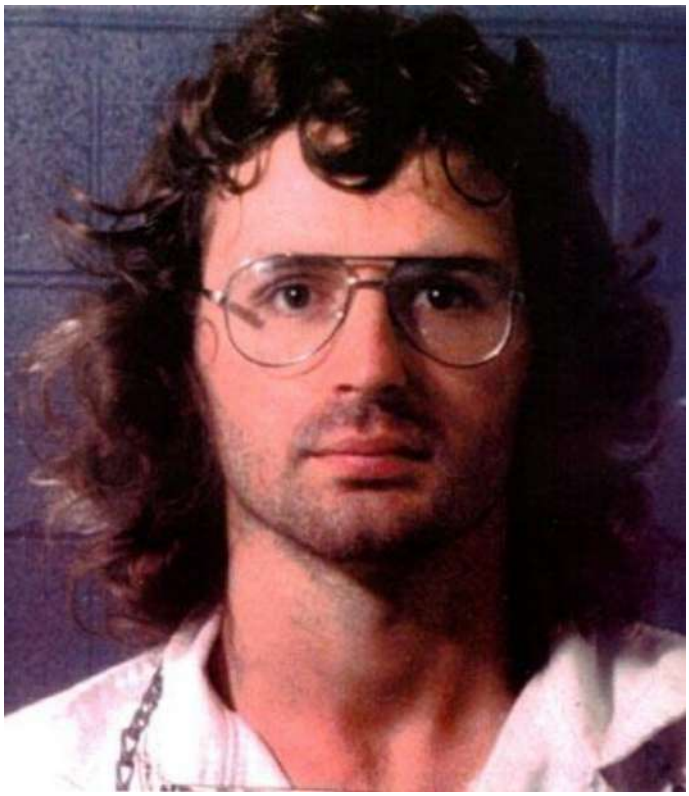
time. … God allows men to be born into sin. It is natural for man to sin. If you're going to be fair, you've got to give man a way out."

In the summer of 1990, Howell legally changed his name to David Koresh, a change that was supposed to symbolize to his followers a connection to two Old Testament figures. David symbolized a lineage to King David, from whom the Messiah would come, while Koresh is the Persian name of Cyrus the Great, the Persian king seen as a messiah figure because he allowed the Jews to return to the land of Israel after the Babylonian captivity. By changing his name to David Koresh, he was professing to his followers that he was the spiritual descendant of the biblical David and, therefore, the Messiah.



Koresh

Such was his control over his followers that they accepted Koresh's claim. Livingstone Fagan was one of the believers who survived, and he remained faithful to Koresh's teachings long after the siege was over and the smoke had cleared. He later wrote, "David Koresh is Messiah, being first amongst men to be born into God Consciousness. Having been born under the first

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creation into this consciousness, he was established as a sign post (sic) before this creation, to show Adam's race a way out should they fall short of the standard set at the beginning. Hence the phrase "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the earth." As a matter of fact, Adam was created like unto God the Son at the conclusion of the first creation, which is the material image of God. God the Son, of the first creation, has been raised up from death for the salvation of man. This time however he is to be made Messiah over the coming kingdom of God on earth. The Spirit of God is to dwell in all its citizens."

Just Bible Students

"That fall I went to Waco to play music and meet the larger community. The people at Mount Carmel were extremely involved in knowing and learning the Bible. People have made it seem as if Mount Carmel came out of nowhere. In fact, Koresh was the third leader of a community that spun off from the Seventh Day Adventists in the 1930s. They had been living outside of Waco since 1933. The people around Koresh came from many backgrounds. One irony of Waco is that right-wing extremists and racists look to Mount Carmel as a beacon. If they realized that so many of us were black, Asian and Latino, and that we despised their hateful politics and anger, they would probably feel betrayed. We weren't political at all – just Bible students. We had a 'live and let live' attitude that had allowed us to get along well with our neighbors for over 60 years. We certainly weren't as isolated as people seem to think. We shopped in town, worked in the community, and our band played weekend gigs in Waco nightclubs. I worked as a bartender in Waco and I doubt a single customer would tell you that I stood out in any way."

In 1992, Koresh sold most of the group's land around Waco and kept only 77 acres, which he fortified with increased security measures. By this time, there were multiple generations living on the compound, including young adults who knew of no other life. Nonetheless, those living in and around the compound slowly became aware that there was something strange going on at "Mount Carmel," which had been named after a mountain in Israel considered sacred in the Old Testament. Bob Lott, the City Editor for the *Waco Tribune Herald*, later observed, "[His followers] truly believe that he

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was the messiah. … And his role was to open the seven seals that are mentioned in the Book of Revelation. He had what was called his new light revelation and that was that as the messiah, he should generate a new population of people to inherent the kingdom of God and to do that all of the women in the group belonged to him." One survivor, Clive Doyle, agreed, saying, "He began to present the ideas that he had and I'd say 99 percent of the leadership of the church that were living at Mount Carmel accepted him as having a message from God. … David was constantly talking to God. God told me to do this. God told me to do that. And we accepted that. … The men in the group would choose to become celibate. And if they were married, they would, you know, not have any more relations with their wives. … When David first started teaching, he began to show that God asked prophets to do what we might consider strange things a lot of times."

Not surprisingly, Koresh told a different but equally disturbing version of the story: "God speaks to me. I have a message to present. … I mean, there are some things that God has concealed in his written word that are to be brought to do right before the end of time. … It's true. I do have a lot of children. And it's true I do have a lot of wives. I mean, I just -- it is my great, wonderful looks, something that women can't resist."

However, it wasn't just the number of wives he had; it was the age they were when he "married" them. Lott explained, "We had evidence that he had sexually abused girls as young as 12. We also discovered that that had been going on for a couple of years and law enforcement had not done anything really to prevent it or stop it."

Concerned, Lott assigned two reporters, Mark England and Darlene McCormick, to investigate the accusations. After eight months following the story, the two reported their findings in a series of seven articles published in the *Tribune-Herald* in February 1993. In the paper, the two turned a harsh spotlight on group: "If you are a Branch Davidian, Christ lives on a threadbare piece of land 10 miles east of here called Mount Carmel. He has dimples, claims a ninth-grade education, married his legal wife when she was 14, enjoys a beer now and then, plays a mean guitar, reportedly packs a 9mm Glock and keeps an arsenal of military assault rifles, and willingly admits that he is a sinner without equal. David Koresh is now his legal name. He changed it two years ago in California, supposed to enhance his career as

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a musician. To former cult members and law enforcement authorities, though, he is still Vernon Howell. Many of Howell's followers are former Seventh-day Adventists. The Seventh-day Adventist Church strongly denies any connection with Howell's group. Howell's followers have come to 77 acres near the Elk community from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England, Hawaii and throughout the continental United States. The end of the world is near, they believe. Howell, 33, is their salvation. … Although many followers have fled, Howell remains with about 75 faithful in a compound they built to await the end of the world. Former cult members and authorities say it is heavily armed. Guards reportedly walked the grounds at night. Perched above the compound is a tower with lookout windows facing all directions."

The articles went on to accuse Koresh and other leaders of the cult of gross and violent abuse against children. According to the reporters, Koresh was a polygamist who regularly "married" underage girls and claimed to be entitled to sexual favors from any female living in the compound. These accusations were backed up by an anonymous woman who said,"[Koresh] was supposed to be the son of God. He said God was really lonesome, and he wanted grandchildren. It was like the Scriptures kind of said it, but they didn't really. It was like he was giving God grandchildren."

While the allegations made in the articles were horrific, they had been made against numerous cult leaders in the past. Instead, what set Koresh apart was the fact that the paper reported the Branch Davidians also had stockpiles of weapons. These rumors came courtesy of a UPS driver who was delivering a package that broke open and contained a number of weapons, including unarmed grenades and black powder. On July 9, 1992, the ATF opened an investigation into these claims and to others made by people who claimed they had heard what sounded like automatic gunfire coming from the compound. A member of the Branch Davidians, Marc Breault, later admitted that Koresh indeed had the parts necessary to convert regular guns into automatic weapons, which was in clear violation of the Hughes Amendment of the Firearm Owners Protection Act of 1986.

In the course of the investigation, FBI Agent Randy Parsons summarized what the government discovered: "They had acquired…weapons, rifles, pistols, shotguns, grenades, grenade launchers. Almost two million rounds of

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ammunition. A fully automatic rifle is, of course, illegal to possess." David Aguilera, an agent with the ATF, was assigned to investigate and later recalled, "I was discovering a lot of AR-15s. They were converting these weapons from semiautomatic to automatic weapons. I was outraged and I was able to go out and get enough probable cause to make sure that, you know, I'm going to get my warrant for this guy."

The ATF sent a surveillance team to rent a house across the road from the compound in January 1993. The agents posed as college students and sent one man to "meet the neighbors." Aguilera explained, "We had an undercover agent, Special Agent Robert Rodriguez, who actually had interaction and met with David Koresh. He says, you know, I don't care what the ATF says or does. It's my right to -- you know, to bear weapons, and nobody is ever going to take me down. That's a red flag."

A bunch of 30-something guys sharing a house and claiming to be college students struck Koresh as suspicious, and he stopped leaving the compound as he had regularly used to do. By then, however, the agents had enough information to obtain search warrants for the compound and an arrest warrant for the cult leader himself. On February 25, 1993, Aguilera presented U.S. Magistrate Dennis Green with an affidavit stating that the Branch Davidians had purchased a large number of legal gun parts that he felt could be used to create illegal weapons. "As a result of my training and experience as a Special Agent for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, I am familiar with the Federal firearm and explosive laws and know that it is unlawful for a person to manufacture, possess, transfer, or to transport or ship in interstate commerce machine guns, machine gun conversion parts, or explosives which are classified, by Federal law, as machine guns, and/or destructive devices, including any combination of parts either designed or intended for use in converting any firearm into a machine gun, or into a destructive device as defined by Federal law, and from which a destructive device may be readily assembled, without them being lawfully registered in the National Firearms Registration and Transfer Record, U.S. Treasury Department, Washington, D.C. During my 5 years' experience with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, I have investigated persons who have unlawfully possessed, transferred or shipped in interstate or foreign commerce firearms and/or explosive devices which

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were not registered to them with the National Firearms Registration and Transfer Record, and have successfully participated in the prosecution of several of these individuals."

In addition to telling the court about all the investigations and interviews he had performed himself, Aguilera related a very disturbing tale told to investigators by a social worker with the Texas Department of Human Services, Joyce Sparks. "Ms. Sparks said that she noticed a trap door in the floor at one end of the building. When she inquired about it, Koresh allowed her to look into the trap door. She could see a ladder leading down into a buried school bus from which all the seats had been removed. At one end of the bus she could see a very large refrigerator with numerous bullet holes. She also saw three long guns lying on the floor of the bus, however, she did not know the make or caliber of them. She stated that there was no electricity in the bus. Everything she saw was with the aid of a pen light. When questioned by Ms. Sparks, Koresh said that the bus was where he practiced his target shooting in order not to disturb his neighbors. … When she asked to speak with some of the children and other residents, Koresh refused, stating they were not available. She said that during her conversation with Koresh, he told her that he was the 'Messenger' from God, that the world was coming to an end, and that when he 'reveals' himself the riots in Los Angeles would pale in comparison to what was going to happen in Waco, Texas. Koresh stated that it would be a 'military type operation' and that all the 'non-believers' would have to suffer."

Guns Blazing

"Many have suggested that Koresh was a Jim Jones-like madman. He wasn't. He had no plans for mass suicide. In contrast to Jones, Koresh allowed members to leave at any time, and many of them did, even during the siege. But many stayed, too, not because we had to, but because we wanted to. We felt the FBI and ATF had been dishonest from the start. Few Americans realize that on February 28, 1993 when ATF agents in National Guard helicopters zoomed in on Mount Carmel Center, they did so with guns blazing. The initial raid, in which four ATF agents and six Davidians were killed, was a publicity stunt for the 20/20 television show, who were there to document it. ATF employees would later admit the underlying charges were

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‘a complete fabrication.’ Everyone knew David Koresh hated drugs. Charges that we were assembling an arsenal of weapons to be used against the government were equally off-base. We had nothing to hide. In fact, weeks before the raid, Koresh offered the ATF the opportunity to come out to Mount Carmel and inspect the compound.” - David Thibodeaux, one of the survivors

Having obtained the warrants he needed, Aguilera scheduled the raid for February 28, the same day the *Herald Tribune* published the last article in their series, one that included the story of escaped cult member Marc Breault’s triumph in getting a 10 year old girl named Kiri Jewell away from Koresh. By this time, the paper had also heard that there was going to be a raid, and thus reporters were there to cover what happened. Lott explained, “One of our reporters had gotten a tip from a confidential informant who told him that they were going to do something, so we made plans to have people out there to cover whatever it was.”

The ATF planned to send 75 agents into the compound at once, and it was hoped that they would be able to spread out quickly and take control of the situation. Then they would search the premises and arrest Koresh. Unfortunately, the Branch Davidians were expecting trouble and were ready for the agents. As Aguilera subsequently put it, “I thought the plan had it not been compromised would have worked. … [When Robert found out he] immediately excused himself, look, I had to leave. David said, no, stay. Robert said, no, I got to go. And as Robert tells me, he walks out the door, and he says, I was just waiting for them to put a bullet in my back. And he said they're looking at us. They know we're coming. You need to call this off. But it was too late, too much had been done and the agents felt that they had no choice but to go forward.”

Thus, on Sunday morning, February 28, “Operation Showtime” went into action. 76 ATF agents left the Bellmead Civic Center before the sun came up, headed for Waco in a mile long convoy that featured, among other things, two cattle trailers in which the agents were to hide during the approach to the compound.

They arrived at the compound around 9:45 a.m., and as helicopters buzzed overhead, the agents rushed the building. Aguilera described what happened:

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“Those that made the initial entry, their concern, where are the children? They had candy bars in their pockets to give out. Chocolate for the kids. Wow. … A barrage of gunfire just went right through the door. [Agent Roland Ballesteros] died…. How could these guys just start shooting at us?” Clive Doyle, one of the cult members, admitted that some of the Branch Davidians began shooting at the agents: “Suddenly there was some that shot back. We're not denying that. Because they…weren't trusting us and we weren't probably too trusting of them because they were continuing to shoot.”

The agents’ goal was to capture Koresh, and within the first minute of the assault, three agents made it to his bedroom window before being fired upon. Agent Bill Buford was one of the agents involved that day and later testified, “Initially, prior to exiting the trailer, I heard a tremendous amount of gunfire at the front of the building. It seemed to be all the way across the building, automatic weapons fire, machine gun fire. My team went to the east side of the building, we put our ladders onto the roof. As we were ascending the roof, we received a lot of fire. I could hear the rounds cracking around my head as we went onto the roof. Almost immediately upon getting on the roof, Conway LeBleu, one of my agents, was shot through the head and killed immediately. After he was shot, the Davidians continued to shoot into his body, even though it was obvious he was dead. This happened on several occasions. The window I was going to make entry through, we broke the window out, entered the window and received a withering gunfire on the inside. I encountered one armed individual on the inside. He had backed through a doorway. I went to the doorway and he attempted to enter the room again with an AK-47. I shot and I believe I hit him. He fell. I shot him in the doorway there. Almost immediately. Special Agent Glen Jordan yelled that he had been hit, and I went back to where Glen was. The amount of fire coming into the room was tremendous. I remember thinking I cannot believe I am not getting hit. … I asked him if he could go, that we needed to get out. About that time, I was shot the first time. A round came through the floor, an M-16 round, I believe. It struck me in the left buttocks and traveled up my thigh and lodged next to my thigh about midway in the thigh.”

Obviously, this was not the way warrants were usually served, so most of the agents had never even fired a weapon outside of a shooting range. Now

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they found themselves in a war zone. Buford continued, “I at that point was knocked back and looked down and observed that this was the arms room as we had thought it was. There were weapons in a gun rack there. There was also a box of hand grenades that I was kneeling beside. And I remember thinking to myself I am glad that those did not go off, because I had to put a distraction device, a flashbang upon going into the room. I again asked Glen if he thought he could go, and the other agent in the room Keith Constantino said he could give us cover. About that time, I was shot twice, once in the hip and once in the upper thigh with an AK-47, I believe. At that point, I realized that I was severely wounded and we needed to get out of the room. I again helped Agent Jordan get to his feet, and Agent Keith Constantino covered for us as we made our way out the window. After I got out onto the roof, I was unable to get to my feet. I rolled off of the roof, fell to the ground and broke several ribs when I hit the ground, and that pain led me to believe that I had been shot again. However, I had not. Two of our agents dragged me around to the side where they thought I would be out of the line of fire. They…went to get some medical equipment to take care of me. As I laid there, obviously, no threat to anyone, they began to shoot at me again. The rounds were hitting all around my head. I was unable to move because of the wounds I had already received. I was struck in the face at that time with a round, and Special Agent Ken Chism ran over and jumped on top of me and covered me with his body. They then took me around to the side of the building where I remained for the remainder of the firefight, which lasted about 2 1/2hours.”

ATF agent Gerald Petrilli testified about the raid and described his vantage point: “We never made it to the front door of the structure. …the entire front of the compound erupted in gunfire ... I heard all the gunfire coming from the compound at us. I saw muzzle flashes. I saw curtains billowing out at the same time I saw muzzle flashes. … There was no way for us to simply get up and walk out without being slaughtered ... We were stuck there.”

The agents quickly realized that they were in over their heads and withdrew, calling for ambulances and help from the FBI. Byron Sage, one of the Bureau’s best crisis negotiators, got there first, a little over an hour after the first shots were fired. He remembered, “The morning of February 28th, 1993, I will never forget. [When] I got there a little after 11:00, [the] gun

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battle was still raging, which was significant. The average gun battle with law enforcement lasts about two seconds. This was a gun battle that had raged now for well over an hour. … Our top priority right from the start was to get a lid on the violence and then to bring their emotionality down." Bob Ricks, a Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Oklahoma City Field Office, arrived soon after Sage and agreed, saying, "Bullets were coming out of every window within the compound. [The agents] had the look of defeat, the look of despair, the look of despondency. They had gone through a horrible day and were forcibly required to retreat from that scene."

The task of trying to reason with the Davidians fell to ATF Agent Jim Cavanaugh, who recalled, "We were taking an awful beating. So many men were hurt and wounded and lying down there. When I called the compound, it was Steven Schneider. And he started screaming through the phone that we had no right to be there, to get off the property immediately. I tried to stay calm. I said, Steve, we have to talk. We have to work this out. You and I have to work this out. People are dying. People are hurt. We need to stop the shooting."

Next, Koresh himself got on the phone, leading to the following strange exchange:

> "CAVANAUGH: Everything is OK. Just you and me are talking. And that's the main thing. Because you care for people and then you're sincere and honest.
> KORESH: I care about my father.
> CAVANAUGH: That's right.
> KORESH: My father in heaven."

Cavanaugh later mused, "I had a radio mike in one ear with an agent pleading for his life, and I had this guy on the phone who thought he was God. … When you drove up, the Davidians opened fire, and I am sickened by any other assertion. We didn't shoot first. We didn't. They shot first. And if I thought that an ATF agent would drive up in front of a structure and shoot, I'd throw my badge in the garbage. It didn't happen."

Cavanaugh and the other negotiators persisted and finally arranged a ceasefire at around 11:30 a.m. By then, four agents were dead and 14 more

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were injured. A number of cult members were also injured, including Koresh himself, and five were killed, two by their own people.

Both sides later claimed the other fired the first shot. At 4:00 that afternoon, David Koresh released a message to KRLD Radio in which he claimed he and his people were innocent bystanders attacked by the federal government. “They started firing at me and so then what happened was some of the young men started firing on them. They fired on us first.”

Less than an hour later, Michael Schroeder, one of the kingpins in the cult’s gun business, was shot while returning to the compound.

Around 7:30, Koresh himself did a phone interview with CNN, after which the FBI requested that no more interviews be done because the situation had been classified as a hostage crisis. Nonetheless, KRLD did another on-air interview with Koresh at around 10:00 that evening, during which he devoted his remarks to preaching about his role as a Messiah and claiming that no one else in the compound had been as severely injured as he was:

> “REPORTER: Mr. Koresh, how are you doing?
>
> KORESH: (INAUDIBLE)
>
> REPORTER: I understand you've been wounded. Would you describe your position?
>
> KORESH: Weakening.
>
> REPORTER: Are you shot, sir?
>
> KORESH: Yes, I am.”

Ultimately, the Department of the Treasury (which the ATF was a part of at the time) concluded in their report on the original raid, “On February 28, 1993, near Waco, Texas, a major law enforcement operation failed. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms tried to carry out a flawed raid plan based on one critical element, the element of surprise. Despite knowing in advance that the element of surprise was lost, the raid commanders made the decision to go forward. This decision was brutally exploited by Koresh and his followers. Despite the courageous efforts of ATF agents, four agents were murdered and twenty others were wounded. The vivid and painful

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conclusion of the operation focused national attention on these events and on ATF. The Review was a response to that public concern."

Under Siege for 51 Days

"The most disturbing allegation was that we were engaging in child abuse there. The children of Mount Carmel were treasured, and they were a vital part of our small society. Occasionally kids were paddled for misbehaving, but the strict rule was they could never be paddled in anger. The parents did the paddling themselves. Our kids were happy, healthy, and well cared for. The biggest lie, though, is the government's claim that we set the building fire ourselves, to commit suicide. On the April morning when the FBI finally made its move, we had been under siege for 51 days. It was the coldest spring in Texas history that year. The FBI had cut off our power, so we had to heat the building with kerosene lamps. It was kerosene from these lamps and the storage canisters, spilled as a result of collapsing walls and FBI munitions fire, that is cited as evidence that we doused Mount Carmel with an intent of burning it. The 400 rounds of CS gas that the FBI shot into Mount Carmel was mixed with methylene chloride, which is flammable and can explode. The United States and 130 other countries signed the Chemical Weapons Convention banning the use of CS gas in war. Apparently there is no prohibition against its use against American citizens. The amount of gas the FBI shot into Mount Carmel was twice the density considered life threatening to an adult and even more dangerous for little children." - David Thibodeaux, one of the survivors

After the failed raid, a siege around the compound commenced, and the FBI took over in Waco. Jeff Jamar, out of San Antonio, was made the Site Commander, and Richard Rogers, already infamous for his involvement in the Ruby Ridge incident a year earlier, headed the Hostage Rescue Team. Ricks recalled, "Shortly thereafter they were told that we were going to be taking over the handling of the response to the events on that day and that was crushing for them as well." Aguilera explained it from an ATF viewpoint: "At the time, you know, it's personal. You have some animosity. I felt a little, you know, hey, someone is coming in and taking away what I started. But you know, it was for the best because you never know because of what we just went through, what we could have done."

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Understandably, the FBI agents who arrived were concerned about what they were getting themselves into. Special Agent Randy Parsons later admitted, “When I first got there, it was a very tense, uncomfortable environment. It was an uncomfortable situation because the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms felt a great sense of loss. It was their own men, their own agents, who were down and were gone.” Furthermore, they were dealing with a frustrating character in Koresh. According to Parsons, “Communications opened up pretty quickly. He loved to talk. He loved to hear himself talk. So there was no lack of communication. There was a lack of productive communication.” Sage had a similar opinion: “[Koresh] was so calm to a point where we began to immediately start questioning what kind of personality are we dealing with? What we ultimately had come to realize is that we had well over 100 individuals inside of the heavily fortified compound that were there voluntarily because they had backed what they felt was their messiah.”

Of course, there were a number of people who were not in the compound voluntarily, and Koresh knew that the FBI’s top priority was rescuing the children, so he used that knowledge to his advantage. At one point, he told agents, “There's a lot of children here. I've had a lot of babies these past few years. … I gave them a message for the radio so that the public can listen to where I'm coming from. And I explained that every time they play it, I would send two of the children out.” The FBI allowed the message to be played, after which Koresh did release a number of children and even a few adults.

Once that happened, Koresh told the agents that if they would play one of his sermons on national television, he would come out peacefully: “If they'll show me and show the world what the seven seals are and where they're at in the prophesies, then I will be satisfied and then we'll all come out to you.”

For a short time, the agents hoped they had found their answer through this proposal. Sage noted, “That tape was played in the afternoon about 3:00. Went for about an hour and then the clock starts ticking.” However, nothing happened until Koresh spoke up and said God had told him to remain inside. Ricks explained, “We're all waiting. We're anticipating. We had buses lined up to receive everybody. … Now we knew when we had a person who said he was speaking directly to God and God had told him to wait that this was

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not going to be normal." For his part, Cavanaugh said he believed "that was our last best chance to get him to ever come out. He was fatigued. He was wounded. He was hurt. We had been working on him for three days. But at the very last moment he couldn't do it. He couldn't leave this place where he was God with unlimited sexual favors and walk out to a cold jail cell. He tricked us. He fooled us. He played with us."

The FBI remained focused on rescuing the children, but it became clearer that the Branch Davidians were not going to release them, and Sage described how this colored the agents' attitudes: "That was one of the first and more significant glimpses of the disingenuous nature of how David was dealing with us as far as promises and truthfulness. … [With one exception] We never got another child out. We've got a total of 21, and I will be eternally grateful for the fact that we were able to accomplish that. … We continued to press David on that. David finally became very upset with the negotiator, and he stopped and yelled at them. He said, hey, you don't understand. The rest of these children are my children. They're not coming out. The battle of Armageddon was on." The only other child released was a little girl who came out with a note pinned to her jacket saying, "Once the children are out, the adults will die."

The children who had been released, ranging from infants to 12 year olds, told horrific stories of physical and sexual abuse, strengthening the FBI's commitment to arrest Koresh. According to its report to the Attorney General, "On or about March 6, Director Sessions called Gary Coker, Esq., a private practitioner in Waco, to discuss the possibility of Coker acting as a negotiator with Koresh. Sessions explained he decided on his own to contact Coker because, as he said, no one seemed to have the 'key to Koresh.' Sessions said that in his discussions with Coker, Coker said that he had represented Koresh previously (as Vernon Howell), that he was currently representing one of the first women to leave the compound, and that he would walk into the compound to 'pave the way.' Director Sessions recalled that Coker was confident that Koresh was remorseful. Coker told Sessions that Koresh had come from a broken home, and described Koresh as egotistical, messianic, and craving attention. He said that Koresh needed to exert 'strong control,' and that the Branch Davidians did whatever Koresh told them to do. Sessions further recalled Coker saying that Koresh feared

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going to prison. Sessions noted that Koresh had been acquitted in the earlier shooting case involving George Roden. He and Coker agreed it would be helpful if someone -- perhaps Branch Davidian Wayne Martin, a lawyer -- discussed the fairness issue with Koresh. The conversation ended with Coker offering to speak by telephone with Koresh and to introduce Koresh to the Director. … On March 12, the first young adults -- Kathy Schroeder and Oliver Gyarfas -- exited the compound. When they called back into the compound, the FBI recorded and later broadcast those conversations over the P.A. system to those inside."

Desperate for more information, the agents hid microphones in cartons of milk they sent in for the children, and they also gave Koresh a video camera so he could record statements made by those in the compound. Naturally, all the video material that came back supported Koresh's claim that everyone was happy to remain with him. Ricks observed, "We really wanted to talk to as many of the children as we could. To see their faces and maybe talk to the mothers if possible, see if they were being held against their will. We were trying to determine what was the nature of the people inside the compound? Were they healthy? Were they suffering? We learned very rapidly that these people came from all walks of life. Some of them very bright people."

Of course, things were even more tense for people in the compound. According to Clive Doyle, who was in the compound throughout the siege, "there was a lot of fear. People were making remarks like, well, if they have got this kind of firepower, if they open up on us, this place is going to look like swiss cheese. People were very concerned that they'd either be shot by the tanks or if the tanks made incursions into the building that we would be crushed by falling timbers and so on."

While the FBI continued to wait and hope for a peaceful resolution, they used various tactics to make things inside the compound as uncomfortable as possible, often playing loud music or shining bright lights in at night. They also cut off both the phones and electricity periodically. Doyle mentioned the effects those tactics had: "And so people like myself who was occupied with various jobs of taking care of garbage, taking care of human waste and so on, throughout the 50 days felt that in all likelihood the women, the children, the elderly would be the first ones out and those of us who were able-bodied and able to take care of necessary chores would probably be the last, but we were

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sincerely expecting to come out. Everybody I know in there had their bags packed, but as the 50 days wore on, as the tactical team and the tanks began to do things on a more and more — you know, more and more pressure was expended by them, which seemed to work at cross-purposes with what the negotiators were promising and so on, people began to balk. … We had the electricity turned off, of course, and most of our fresh or frozen foods were destroyed or spoiled. So as I say, we went through varying degrees of hell with noise, music, bright lights. The children were suffering along with the adults. We were without water. Having had our water tanks shot up, we were living on rainwater. Whenever it would rain people would put buckets out the window and collect rainwater. It was rationed. I doubt whether anybody got more than eight ounces a day, if that. I lost 25 pounds by April 19. I know others that lost about the same amount."

The Tanks Rolled In

"I never heard any discussion of suicide or starting fires. If we wanted to kill ourselves, we would not have waited 51 cold, hungry, scary days to do it. It remains hard for me to clearly remember what happened after the tanks made their move. Walls collapsed, the building shook, gas billowed in and the air was full of terrible sounds: the hiss of gas, the shattering of windows, the bang of exploding rockets, the raw squeal of tank tracks. There were screams of children and the gasps and sobs of those who could not protect themselves from the noxious CS. This continued for hours. Inside, the notion of leaving seemed insane; with tanks smashing through your walls and rockets smashing through the windows, our very human reaction was not to walk out into a hail of death, but to find a safe corner and pray. As the tanks rolled in and began smashing holes in the building and spraying gas into the building, the FBI loudspeakers blared, "This is not an assault! This is not an assault!" It was a very surreal and personal apocalypse." - David Thibodeaux, one of the survivors

Two weeks into the siege, Koresh agreed to send out two of his people to meet with the FBI. Sage explained, "He had selected Steve Schneider, his number one lieutenant, and Wayne Martin, their Harvard-educated attorney, to come out and talk to our representative. The tension was extremely high. You could quite literally feel the crosshairs on him from the Branch

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Davidian compound, as I'm sure Steve Schneider and Wayne Martin could feel from our tactical teams and had everybody covered."

A few days later, Sage had a very interesting phone conversation with Koresh. "At one point he's talking about my salvation. And I said, David, I am absolutely confident in my salvation as a Christian, and you, partner, are not in a position to judge me. Now that was a very calculated move because stop and think about it. If this individual was delusional and thought that he was Jesus Christ, who is in more of a position to judge me as a Christian than Jesus Christ? But in my mind it had resolved a very critical question, and that is, I did not feel that he was delusional or felt that he was the second coming of Christ. I think that he was a conman and his chosen area of con was religion."

On March 29, Koresh met with Richard DeGuerin, an attorney his mother had hired. According to the FBI's report to the Attorney General, "The following day, DeGuerin again met with Koresh, from approximately 10:00 a.m. until noon, and from 2:00 until 6:00 p.m. Also on March 30, at 3:18 p.m., Steve Schneider spoke with his attorney, Jack Zimmerman, by telephone. DeGuerin returned to the compound on March 31st for approximately five hours. On April 1, both DeGuerin and Zimmerman were inside the compound for eight hours. Three days later, on April 4, they were back in for just over five hours. SAC Jamar said there had been extensive conversations and some disagreement regarding Mr. DeGuerin's access to the compound. Because he thought that any effort to remove the Branch Davidians from the compound peaceably should be attempted, Jamar decided to let him in. Due to the attorney-client privilege, there was no court-authorized Title III monitoring of the conversations that occurred within. DeGuerin did not report anything of value to the FBI after his visits with Koresh and the Davidians. Likewise, Mr. Zimmerman, Schneider's attorney, did not produce any useful information. In SAC Jamar's view, subsequent monitoring of conversations inside the compound revealed that Koresh had used the attorneys to buy time and make it appear that he was interested in resolving the standoff."

By this time, the area around the siege had taken on the look of a circus as all sorts of outsiders began to flood into the area. Branch Davidian supporter David Treibs gave the following account of what happened on April 3, just

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two weeks before the final assault. “Others were gathering, including men, women, children, and at least 1 baby. Some made their signs. We left around 7:43 am…caravaning to the hill above the roadblock, after picking up Gary Hunt who said he had power of attorney for Koresh. He said this came about because during an interview on the radio which Koresh was apparently listening to, it was asked if K wanted someone come to Mt. C, and if Koresh wanted Mr. Gary Hunt to act as his attorney, or to have power of attorney, and the satellite antenna moved, indicating a positive. … One vendor guy was selling buttons to support the ATF, and was arguing with some in our company that this (Waco) was his area and he supported what ATF was doing and we were wrong. … We met up with folks from Dallas, Austin, and several other places. … It seemed there were more media than us, and more police than us. We had at least 40-50 people, because at least 25 people came from San Antonio. … Some local residents came by just to see what was going on today, to get the latest scoop. Sometime after arrival, some bigmouthed rather obnoxious guy came and started picking arguments with anyone who would argue. John Zimmerman took the bait, and a rather heated, loud discussion ensued. The media quickly flocked around this altercation. People from our side tried to quiet JZ and any others down, saying the dude was an ATF plant trying to make us look like bozos. Someone said the ATF also has sympathizers or plants at press conferences who rescue ATF whenever a good line of questioning was playing out by asking trivial questions.”

While the world watched in horror as the Branch Davidian Compound went up in smoke on April 19, 1993, no one was aware that there was a man standing in the shadows who would bring about another conflagration just two short years later. Timothy McVeigh, the product of an unloving, broken home, was a self-professed “survivalist” and a student of such books as *The Turner Diaries*, a novel raving against the United States and urging others to overthrow its government. Michelle Rausch was a journalism student at Southern Methodist University when she heard about the standoff in Waco, and she decided to head out to the compound to see for herself what was happening. By doing so, she became the one human connection between two historic events. She later testified, “I was writing for the school paper and had kind of been following the Waco standoff, and I knew there was another

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angle to the story, and I wanted to find what that angle was. … So I took it upon myself during my spring break to travel to Waco to find what other angle to the, quote, 'Davidian standoff' there might be. … This is how I found Mr. McVeigh, when I walked up on the hill. He was sitting on the hood of his car with some bumper stickers that were for sale. … One of them I recall -- I can't see them clearly in this picture -- but Fear the Government that Fears Your Gun, Politicians Love Gun Control. … I told him who I was and I was doing a story for my school paper and asked him why he was there. … He said he just come in response to the standoff and that he -- he went on to say that he was opposed to how they handled the initial raid, that he thought it would be more appropriate had just the local sheriff gone down and issued an arrest warrant. … He had a lot of views that he shared with me, which is -- as a writer and a journalist, I enjoyed speaking with him to write about his views in my article."

Rausch was eventually asked to share with a court some of the quotes from McVeigh that she used in her article. "The first quote: I think if the sheriff served the warrant, it would all be okay. They're not tactical at all. They're government employees. This was in reference to the ATF. Next one: It seems like the ATF just wants a chance to play with their toys, paid for by government money. The next direct quote: The government is afraid of the guns people have because they have to have control of the people at all times. Once you take away the guns, you can do anything to the people. You give them an inch and they take a mile. I believe we are slowly turning into a socialist government. He said, The government is continually growing bigger and more powerful, and the people need to prepare to defend themselves against government control." Rausch concluded her remarks by telling the court, "McVeigh said a sheriff should have served the warrant to Koresh without involving the ATF. Although McVeigh said he is sorry for those killed and injured, he said the ATF had no business being there in the first place. McVeigh said those in the ATF were merely pawns working under the control of government orders. The government thinks it has to spend taxpayer dollars on something, McVeigh said, adding that they saw this as an opportunity and seized it. McVeigh said he believes the government is greatly at fault in Waco and has broken constitutional laws. He quoted the U.S. Constitution and said U.S. armed forces should not be

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used against civilians, yet they were used against Koresh and his followers. McVeigh said he does not believe the Brady Bill is a solution or an adequate attempt at a compromise. McVeigh said the Koresh standoff is only the beginning and that people should watch the government's role and heed any warning signs."

Of course, even as people flocked to the scene, it remained a very dangerous situation seemingly waiting to get out of hand. Treibs remembered, "On arrival at the roadblock we saw brown suited DPS, ATF, Texas Rangers, Waco Police, lined across the road. One ATF guy had an all-black suit and bullet vest. The ATF were in full gear, with bullet vests and either M-16s or AR-15s, MP-5s with both magazines loaded, and shotguns. The ATF each had a sidearm, and most of them had several additional mags for the sidearms. Some of the longarms had mini mag flashlights attached on the business end. … Some of the ATF were spread out beyond the road, as if to keep us from venturing around the block. They were all holding their rifles, as you would expect in any military operation. … . Overhead every once in a while a Huey copter with 2 men on each side with their legs dangling off the edge, I could make out 'FBI' on one jacket, each with an M-16/AR-15 or some other rifle watched us. The helicopter landed at one point in the field, and several times flew quite close and slowly around us."

At this point, no one on either side of the argument was accomplishing anything productive. The FBI tried to get things moving by allowing Koresh to speak to his attorney, but this merely proved to be a stalling tactic on the part of the cult leader. Sage explained, "After the attorneys went in, there was -- David said that he was going to write his manuscript of the meanings of the seven seals. … Finally, on about the 18th of April, the decision was made that we've had enough delays, we've had enough disingenuous lies coming from these individuals. It was time to exercise a tactical resolution."

Indeed, Koresh's estimation on how long the project would take to complete had stretched from two months to a year, and everyone was tired of waiting. Janet Reno, the new Attorney General of the United States, was anxious to be seen as tough and quickly approved the FBI's plan of action. She later said, "I approved the plan and I'm responsible for it. I advised the president, but I did not advise him as to the details." For his part, President

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Clinton asserted, “Finally, I told her that if she thought it was the right thing to do, she could go ahead."

According to a report subsequently sent to Reno, “The first stage of the operation required two Combat Engineering Vehicles (CEVs) to remove all fortifications, obstacles, and vehicles from the front side of the compound. Double rows of concertina wire were to be placed along the front of the building so that the compound would be completely encircled with wire. On execution of the operation order on April 19, two CEVs were to enter the compound inside the concertina wire prior to sunrise. One CEV would have its boom penetrate the structure on the first floor on one corner and project tear gas…. After delivery, the CEV would withdraw from the structure and stand by. Once the first CEV withdrew, the second CEV would insert additional tear gas into the second floor, on the middle of the right side of the building. The booms were to push aside obstructions and, if necessary, sweep left and right into the windows, making an alternative opening to facilitate the injection of the gas. … The second stage of the "chemical agent plan" called for the injection of the gas through a corner in the rear of the structure. It was hoped that by introducing gas at opposite ends of the compound, the Branch Davidians would be forced out the front door and surrender. If firing commenced from the compound, the Bradleys [tanks] would be prepared to deliver ferret liquid tear gas rounds into all windows and openings in the compound structure.”

One concern constantly on the FBI’s mind was that Koresh and his followers would commit suicide, just as the Peoples Temple group had in 1978 under the leadership of Jim Jones. A report to the Attorney General noted, “The input the FBI received regarding the suicidal tendencies of Koresh and his followers was conflicting. …The negotiation team reported its ‘growing concern’ that, despite his statements to the contrary, Koresh might be planning a mass suicide similar to-Jonestown. Nevertheless, the [Behavioral Science Unit] concluded that mass suicide was probably unlikely, because Koresh possessed, among others, the following personality traits: (1) generally acts only in self-interest; (2) statistically shows a low suicide rate; and (3) more likely to arrange a ‘suicide by cop’ situation than to commit suicide. … The experts who analyzed the letters Koresh sent out between April 9 and April 14 also reached different conclusions regarding

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the possibility of suicide. Dr. Miron rejected the possibility of suicide…: ‘In my judgment, we are facing a determined, hardened adversary who has no intention of delivering himself or his followers into the hands of his adversaries. It is my belief that he is waiting for an assault. . . . Koresh's communication does not resemble the suicidal sermon made by Jim Jones in the last hours of Jonestown. His is not the language of those at Massada or Jonestown. He intends to fight.’ However, Krofchek and Van Zandt analyzed the same letter from Koresh and reached a somewhat different conclusion: Koresh was ‘willing to kill, to see his followers die, and to die himself [and was] …’fully capable of creating the circumstances to bring this matter to a 'magnificent' end, in his mind, a conclusion that could take the lives of all of his followers and as many of the authorities as possible.’"

Now it simply remained for the FBI to decide when to act. According to Ricks, “We went 27 days with nobody being released. David Koresh became more violent in his rhetoric. He has made such statements as we are ready for war, let's get it on.” Thus, on April 19, 1993, the 51st day of the siege, the agents moved in. Sage was given a bullhorn and told to warn the Branch Davidians, telling them, in effect, “David, individuals inside the Branch Davidian compound, we are in the process of placing tear gas into the building. Exit the compound now. Submit to the proper authority, David. You are under arrest. This standoff is over. Believe me, it will not get any better. It will only get worse. David, you have had your 15 minutes of fame. It's time to leave the building.”

The final assault began at around 6:00 a.m. that morning, and at first, things went off as planned. The agents were able to breach the compound, allowing them to attempt to flush out the compound’s occupants with gas. However, the Davidians managed to resist the tear gas, some by wearing masks and others by hiding in a concrete bunker within the compound.

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Pictures of a tank breaching various parts of the compound

The Branch Davidians remained in place for nearly six hours, and throughout this time, FBI surveillance devices that recorded comments from within the building indicate that some members were planning to start a fire. Unfortunately, the analysis of the tapes would only come after the confrontation ended because some of the most damning comments couldn't be made out in real time. These included remarks such as "Pablo, have you poured it yet?" "In the hallway" "Things are poured, right?" "Don't pour it all out, we might need some later." "The fuel has to go all around to get started." and "Well, there are two cans here, if that's poured soon." Sometime after 11:30 a.m., other, more obvious comments came through, including "I want a fire." "Keep that fire going." and "Do you think I could light this soon?"

Graeme Craddock, one of the men who escaped the compound, was interviewed by the FBI, and according to the report made to the Attorney General, he told investigators that the Branch Davidians voluntarily started fires: "Craddock advised that when the Bradley came in through the front

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entrance, they started moving fuel. Craddock believes that the compound had a total of approximately one dozen, one gallon containers of lantern fuel and that they had been located in the lobby area. He said he saw a lot of people grabbing fuel containers and moving them to other areas. Craddock believes that possibly three or four of these containers had been put next to the window that had already been knocked out by the Bradley on the southern side of1the chapel area. Craddock said he had heard someone talking about shifting the fuel from the hallway near the chapel to the (northern?) side window of the chapel. . . . He said he had heard someone complain about fuel being spilled inside. … Craddock indicated that he had heard shouts about starting the fire. … Craddock said that he did not believe the fire in the chapel was the first fire because before the fire in the chapel had begun, he had seen smoke outside. Craddock also said that he had heard someone say, 'Light the fire,' and that he had also heard someone else say, 'Don't light the fire.'"

Not long after noon, smoke was seen coming from one of the windows in the compound. One Hostage Rescue Team agent told federal investigators afterwards that around 12:10 p.m., "he was able to identify and observe [a] male who was behind a piano inside the front door of the compound. This individual was wearing a dark mask and was carrying a long gun. Seconds after noticing this individual he noticed the man was moving back and forth behind the piano and the individual then assumed a kneeling position. [The HRT agent] noticed the man's hands moving and immediately after that [he] noticed that a fire started in that position. The man immediately departed the area of the piano. At the same time [the HRT agent] noticed a fire start on the red or right side of the building."

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Pictures of a fire that started in a second floor bedroom and then spread to a kitchen and dining area

David Thibodeaux, one of the few survivors, recounted the scene inside the compound and blamed the federal agents for the fires: “Around noon I heard someone yell, ‘Fire!’ I thought first of the women and children, whom I had been separated from. I tried desperately to make my way to them, but it was impossible: rubble blocked off passageways, and the fire was spreading quickly. I dropped to my knees to pray, and the wall next to me erupted in flame. I smelled my singed hair and screamed. Community member Derek Lovelock, who had ended up in the same place as me, ran through a hole in the wall and I followed. Moments later, the building exploded. In the years since the fire, I’ve tried desperately to find out what really happened. What I’ve discovered is disturbing. There is convincing evidence that the FBI did more than just create the conditions for a deadly inferno. The disclosures about the use of pyrotechnic weapons and incendiary flares show that they might have actually sparked the blaze. A Defense Department document says that members of a US Army Delta Force unit were present at the siege. The military is barred by law from domestic police work. Infrared images taken from surveillance planes indicate that the FBI was – despite its denials

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– firing shots into the building and shooting at Branch Davidians who tried to flee. There are photographs that show one of the metal double-doors at the entrance riddled with bullet indentations that could only have come from shooters outside Mount Carmel."

As the fires became visible, Sage began to plead with Koresh: "My instructions over the loudspeakers went from instructions to, please, David, don't do this. David, don't do this to your people. This is not the way to end this. Lead your people out, David. Be a messiah, not a destroyer."

However, it was too late. Once the fires started, the agents acted quickly to try to have them put out, but there was little they could do. According to their report, "Three minutes after the first reports of fire, (12:13 p.m.) the forward command post requested that firefighting assistance be obtained. At 12:15 fire department units were ordered to respond. At 12:34 the fire vehicles arrived and headed straight for the compound. At 12:41 the fire units approached the remains of the building. Although the fire crews did not approach the burning building until 31 minutes after the fire had first been reported, it would not have been safe for them to do so earlier given the reports of gunfire from inside the compound. The FBI has noted that to fight a building fire successfully, firefighters must be able to enter the inside of the building. The FBI has stated that it would have been unacceptably risky for the firefighters to have attempted to approach, much less enter, the burning compound until it was safe to do so. To do otherwise could well have resulted in the deaths of firefighters. Indeed, SAC Jamar stated that even if the firefighters had arrived at the compound earlier he would not have permitted them to enter due to the great risk to their lives. SAC Jamar has also noted that due to the lack of available water in the Mt. Carmel area it would have been extremely difficult for conventional firefighting operations to succeed."

While people continue to debate how the fires started, what is clear is that the fires quickly spread. Aguilera recalled, "Then all of a sudden you see bursts of flames. I'm, like, my god, I hope they allowed the children to leave. … It was quick. Didn't last very long. The structure of the building was very shadfly made of plywood and it's like a wooden match. … I did not think that he would fulfill his prophecy. That's what he did. … I was not just shocked but just horrified. I mean, to think that these children had perished

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in the fire, and women, and I started asking questions, I'm like, why did this happen? Who started the fire?”

Parsons was also horrified but hopeful that people might still escape: “I will never forget the exact thought that went through my head when I saw the flames. Thank God those mothers will bring their children out now, and we waited and waited and waited, and they didn't bring their children out.”

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Pictures of the fires engulfing the compound

Sage noted that even as the fires spread, the agents tried to end the standoff: “We never stopped our negotiation efforts. We continued right up until I turned off the speakers on that last day at 12:35 in the afternoon. … I don't think we, the FBI, ATF, anybody else ever had any control over how this was going end. I think the only control we truly have was when it was going to end. … We banked on the fact that a parent, if they found their children exposed to that kind of discomfort, would move heaven and earth to get them to a position of safety. And we were wrong. … But how in the world could they have done that to their kids? Nine people came out, not one of them brought a child.”

Clive Doyle was one of the people Sage was talking about; while he escaped, he left behind his teenage daughter, whom he had allowed Koresh to “marry.” He later admitted, “You beat yourself up, and why didn't I go looking for one, why didn't I rescue, why didn't I save anybody? I've kicked myself ever since. People do strange things…. Whether anybody actually deliberately lit a fire in there, I don't know. But my question would be, even if they did, whose fault is it? Is it our fault because we were bent on dying or is it FBI's fault for taunting David?”

His remarks were hardly the only accusations subsequently leveled against the FBI and the ATF. Many went so far as to accuse the agents of starting the fire, which infuriated Ricks: “Everyone was in tears. We could all see the faces of the children. We all knew who they were. We had seen them. And that's what we were dedicated to doing, was trying to rescue those kids out of there. And that had all gone up in smoke and we knew that they were all dying and there was nothing that we could do about it. … It almost became common belief that the FBI had shot the people in there or that the FBI had perhaps started the fire. … I'm not saying the FBI did everything right or that ATF did everything right. But we did not set the fires, we did not murder anybody.”

Despite the anger and conspiracy theories, the evidence was on the government’s side. That evidence included infrared images shot by helicopters at the time the fires started. These pictures clearly showed three separate ignition points within the building before any agent ever reached it.

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Furthermore, as Sage pointed out, “Nine Branch Davidians exited that compound that last day. Seven of the nine had accelerants on their clothing.”

Questions

“Tapes of the negotiations between the FBI and Koresh catch government agents lying about details big and small, as if they wanted the discussions to fail, and wanted only an excuse to attack. There are other questions: Why did the FBI call the local hospital hours before the fire and ask how many beds were available in its burn unit? Why did it not allow firefighters in? What did the FBI negotiator mean when he threateningly said we ‘should buy some fire insurance’? Why did the FBI not allow anyone access to the crime scene, despite their promise to the Texas Rangers that they would be allowed to inspect first? Why did they ever raid the compound to begin with, since no charges from the original warrant were ever filed or substantiated? I often wonder why I survived the blaze. Perhaps it was to be some sort of a witness. Federal agents conducted a police raid that wasn’t necessary based on charges that would never stand up in any US court. They refused to negotiate in good faith, played horrible sounds of animals being slaughtered for weeks, and finally set our home on fire.” - David Thibodeaux, one of the survivors

By 1:00, the fire was out and the compound was gone, as were the lives of 78 men, women and children who had lived there. Ricks claimed, “The children themselves were mostly executed. They were either beat to death, stabbed to death, or shot. … David Koresh was never going to walk out of that place on our terms. It was doomed from day one that that place, which went by the name of Rancho Apocalypse, was destined to end up in flames.” Those who were not shot likely died by their own choice, since there were plenty of routes available for their escape (though a large concrete wall fell on some, killing them or rendering them unable to get out). According to Parsons, Koresh himself was also shot. “It appears as though his second in the command, Steve Schneider, shot David Koresh in the head with a pistol and then Schneider turned the pistol on himself.”

The loss of life stirred the American people, and many began to criticize the nascent Clinton administration. Defending her boss, Reno issued an unequivocal statement taking responsibility: “I made the decision. I'm

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accountable. The buck stops with me and nobody ever accused me of running from a decision that I made based on the best information that I had.” For his part, Clinton issued a statement distancing himself from the incident: “I am deeply saddened by the loss of life in Waco today. My thoughts and prayers are with the families of David Koresh's victims. The law enforcement agencies involved in the Waco siege recommended the course of action pursued today. The Attorney General informed me of their analysis and judgment and recommended that we proceed with today's action given the risks of maintaining the previous policy indefinitely. I told the Attorney General to do what she thought was right, and I stand by that decision.”

Reno

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The controversy around Waco led to a number of civil and criminal trials. 12 of the remaining Branch Davidians were indicted on a variety of charges, including being "part of the conspiracy that Vernon K. Howell, also known as David Koresh, would and did advocate and encourage an armed confrontation, which he described as a 'war,' between his followers and representatives of the United States government. … David Koresh, originally predicted that this 'war' would occur in the Nation of Israel and later changed the location to Mt. Carmel Compound, near Waco, Texas." The accused were also charged with being "part of the conspiracy that in order to arm his followers for the 'war' with the United States…David Koresh, would and did direct that a business location called 'The Mag Bag' be established near the Mt. Carmel Compound for the purpose, among others, of receiving shipments of paramilitary supplies. The supplies purchased and received at The Mag Bag included: firearms parts (including parts for fully automatic AK-47 and M-16 rifles); thirty (30) round magazines and one hundred (100) round magazines for M-16 and AK-47 rifles; pouches to carry large ammunition magazines; substantial quantities of ammunition of various sizes (including .50 caliber armor piercing ammunition); grenade launcher parts, flare launchers, K-bar fighting knives, night vision equipment, hand grenade hulls, Kevlar helmets, bullet proof vests and other similar equipment."

Finally, there was the matter of the fires. The indictment placed the blame for the fires squarely on the Branch Davidians' shoulders: "It was a part of the conspiracy that on April 18, 1993, Vernon K. Howell, also known as David Koresh, and Steven Schneider would and did finalize a plan to burn the Mt. Carmel Compound in the event an effort was made to finally end the siege by the FBI. This plan was communicated to other residents of the compound. It was part of the conspiracy that on April 19, 1993, the conspirators would and did fire upon tanks and other vehicles manned by FBI agents in an attempt to drive them back from the Mt. Carmel Compound. It was a part of the conspiracy that on April 19, 1993 Vernon K. Howell, also known as David Koresh, would give instructions to spread flammable fuel within the Mt. Carmel Compound upon learning that the FBI was to introduce tear gas into the Compound to end the Siege. It was a part

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of the conspiracy that a coconspirator would and did give instructions at about noon on April 19, 1993, to start the fires within Mt. Carmel."

Kathryn Schroeder, whose husband Michael had been killed by agents, arranged a plea bargain in return for her testimony. Eight of those tried were convicted and sentenced to prison terms up to 40 years long. Six appealed, and though the court agreed with some of their claims, it did not overturn their convictions. Eventually, the Supreme Court heard the case and cut each sentence by either five or 25 years. By July 2007, every Branch Davidian who was convicted had been released.

On the other hand, those who escaped alive and the families of those who did not filed a number of civil suits against the federal government and a number of other agencies, but their attempts to collect damages did not amount to much.

Faced with no way to correct the past, the government decided to at least learn what it could in order to prevent similar tragedies in the future. The report concluded, "This review of ATF's investigation of Koresh, ATF's attempt to plan and to execute search and arrest warrants at the Compound, and its efforts to 'manage' the aftermath of the raid, provides a rare opportunity to identify what went wrong, to understand the mistakes that were made, and to learn from this experience to make future operations wiser and safer. Although a few in ATF's management saw the Review as an effort to be resisted, the line agents, throughout the process, have been partners with the Review team. They have been cooperative and committed to finding the truth as an essential effort to advancing the professionalism of their agency. In the course of its examination, the Review identified significant failures on the part of a few individuals. But more importantly, it uncovered serious, systemic defects in ATF's ability to plan for and to conduct a large scale, tactical operation in the context of the difficult circumstances confronted near Waco. These shortcomings, however, should not minimize the difficult challenge such a situation presents to all law enforcement…ATF should not be judged by the events of February 28 alone. There is strength, experience and professionalism throughout the agency, and this Review identifies no problems that cannot be corrected. ATF's leadership can take steps to repair the agency's bruised morale and sharpen and refocus its skills on those unique capabilities which have contributed to

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its pride and its effectiveness in the past. However, to do so the leadership must be committed to positive change and reform. … ATF's leadership has much to accomplish; they also have much to build upon. Despite the flaws exposed by the events outside Waco, the agency is made up of dedicated, committed and experienced professionals, who have regularly demonstrated sound judgment and remarkable courage in enforcing the law. ATF has a history of success in conducting complex investigations and executing dangerous and challenging law enforcement missions. That fine tradition, together with the line agents' commitment to the truth, and their courage and determination has enabled ATF to provide our country with a safer and more secure nation under law."

Remains of a swimming pool at the compound in 1997

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A 1995 picture of the road leading to the compound

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A 1997 picture of the entrance to Mount Carmel

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A 1997 picture of the remains of a burned bus and bathtub at Mount Carmel

Heaven's Gate

When Two Become One

On the third week of March in 1997, dozens of curious looking, modestly dressed individuals sporting similar cropped and buzzed haircuts gathered at a sunlit and verdant California glade. The group took turns – some in pairs, some in threes, and some opting to tackle the task individually – plopping down on the plastic chairs set up in front of a camcorder on a tripod, which they had brought with them, and proceeded to film a series of five-minute segments. To the casual eye, these recordings seem like wholesome, albeit dull content, such as a well-intentioned, but forgettable promotional tourism video, or perhaps even a cheesy video dating montage from some obscure rural town. When viewers learn the true context behind the videos, however,

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which range from unfocused and long-winded off-the-cuff monologues punctuated by addled pauses to pre-prepared statements, the videos become far more chilling, because these outwardly lighthearted recordings are none other than the video manifestos, or “exit videos,” taped by 38 members of the Heaven's Gate cult about a week prior to their mass suicide, which would turn the worlds of their surviving loved ones upside down and leave the rest of the world disturbed and shocked beyond belief.

For each segment, an off-screen videographer asked the subjects to introduce themselves, including the date of their enrollment, before sharing their last words. One video features a pair of young men – one clad in a peach button-down and the other in a navy-blue track jacket – who call themselves “QSTODY” and “SRRODY,” respectively. SRRODY, who joined the cult on Valentine's Day in 1976, appears almost giddy, giggling and restlessly gesturing with his hands as he launches into his segment: “Oh goodness, there is so much I want to say to you...I would really strongly recommend if you can find Heaven's Gate – the book, the website...it'll do you a lot of good...You're better off trusting that than whatever information you come across on TV...” He then addressed friends and former members who had made repeated attempts to warn him about his newfound family before the videographer instructs him to express his thoughts on how he feels about the group's impending “exit”: “This is the happiest day of my life. I've been looking forward to this for so long...Somebody watching this would probably say...'You're deluded or you're brainwashed'...[but] from my perspective, this is...the answer to everything. These flesh vehicles – if you use the analogy of a car...some people say here's a newer model of a car, it's much nicer...this [old] model doesn't quite perform the way it could, so I'd like to move into this new car...That's about all we're talking about; it's not a big deal...”

A second clip features a pair of middle-age women, garbed in checkered and lapis-blue button-downs, who refer to themselves as “LVVODY” and “JNNODY.” Unlike QSTODY and SRRODY, the ladies struggle to make prolonged eye contact with the camera, and their seemingly forced, tight-lipped smiles are unsettling, to say the least. LVVODY, the first to speak, is visibly overcome with emotion, with tears welling up in her eyes and her voice cracking every few seconds. “We're very happy and proud to have

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been members of Ti and Do's class, and couldn't be happier about what we're about to do," LVVODY stammers, taking a deep breath to compose herself. Peals of encouraging laughter can be heard in the background. "That was never an issue. Certainly, at times, temptations of the vehicle...some influences may turn our heads this way or that...[but] there's always a deep down knowing that the moment of seeing Ti and Do...this is why I'm here to do this task..."

The bespectacled QSTODY chimes in, "Probably...the blame will be pointed at Ti and Do...[but] we've always had free reign to come and go, to believe or not believe since day one in the class...Ti and Do would make an effort to push anyone out of the class who didn't want to be here...The more we put into practice – the teachings, the behavior, and the guidelines – the truth that they held becomes more apparent...The last thing that I would've thought on September 13th, 1975 is that in a week, I would find myself in a group leaving behind my human life...but there was just a knowing and a recognition that...Ti and Do were someone [sic] that I had known prior to this reincarnation..."

LVVODY concludes their joint statement: "I can't help but think of the Bible, when Jesus says 'I am the way and the truth and life. No one comes to Father except through me,' he was saying, 'I'm here, I'm sent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. I am the only way you can reach the Next Level of the Kingdom of Heaven.' Now it's the end of the age...and Ti and Do are the Way and the Truth, and the only source of life, and without our connection to Ti and Do, we have nothing..."

From an outsider's perspective, these farewell video diaries are surreal, and they are concrete proof of what can happen when lost, troubled souls are led astray by the illusory promises and specious guidance of deranged individuals. But to achieve a better understanding of why the doomed disciples of Heaven's Gate – previously known as the Next Level Crew, Total Overcomers Anonymous, and the Human Individual Metamorphosis – so willingly submitted themselves to such a cause, it's necessary to look at the lives of the cult's founders and the genesis of the Next Level movement.

Marshall Herff Applewhite was born on March 17, 1931 in the small city of Spur, Texas, situated about 325 miles northwest of Austin. He was the son

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of Texan natives Marshall Herff Applewhite Sr., a roving Presbyterian pastor, and his 30-year-old wife, Louise Haecker Winfield. Marshall had two older sisters named Louise and Jane, as well as a severely physically and mentally challenged younger brother named John, who was later sent to live in a state-run assisted living facility in the city.

While Applewhite grew up comfortably in a middle-class household, he learned from a young age to never become overly attached to his friends and surroundings because his father's job required constant relocation. Every three years or so, the family uprooted to various towns and cities of varying sizes throughout southern Texas, which included places such as Roscoe, Sweetwater, Corpus Christi, and San Antonio. Nevertheless, Applewhite appeared to be a happy-go-lucky and well-adjusted child, with his dirty-blond hair always impeccably gelled. He was often seen with an extra bounce in his step and a permanent twinkle in his cornflower-blue eyes.

By most accounts, Applewhite, Sr. seemed to have been a stellar role model. He was a solid, family-oriented man who never hesitated to help out the community, in particular when it came to constructing churches and assembling congregations from scratch in every town and city on his route. In a later interview, Floyd Chapman, president of the Corpus Christi Electric Company, recounted his experiences with Applewhite, Sr., who built and presided over the Parkway Presbyterian Church in the early 1950s. Chapman described the minister as a jovial man with exceptional organizational and leadership skills “who built [the] church up to a couple of hundred members pretty [quickly].” He further commended Applewhite, Sr. and his wife, who served as the church's choir director and resident organ player, for their children's excellent manners.

That said, according to one conflicting account, which came from an unnamed family friend, how Applewhite, Sr. behaved behind closed doors was apparently a very different story. Applewhite, Sr. is said to have been a strict, “terribly authoritative,” and rigidly stubborn man, and he was especially hard on his only son and namesake, so much so that the family friend found it to be a cause for concern. Either way, young Marshall admired his father profoundly and wanted nothing more than to make him proud.

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There were virtually no signs from Applewhite's youth that foretold his harrowing future, apart from his competitive nature. He was an ambitious go-getter who brimmed with personality and enlisted in several extracurricular clubs and student councils. He also competed for the presidential posts in these organizations. “He was always a born leader and very charismatic,” said his sister Louise. “He could get people to believe anything.”

Following his graduation from Corpus Christi High School in 1948, Applewhite went to Austin College, but what degree he pursued remains unclear. According to one account, he was listed as a philosophy major, and according to another, he double majored in Music and Pre-Theology at his father's request. He is also believed to have studied music at the University of Colorado for a semester or two, though how this fit into the timeline of his post-secondary education is also unclear.

Like those who knew Applewhite in his childhood, his peers at Austin College only had fond memories of him. He was a typical, easy-going freshman with a penchant for colorful beanies, who preferred to be referred to by his unique middle name. His roommate, John Alexander, described him as a studious extrovert, one well-liked by both teachers and classmates. “He was popular,” Alexander recalled. “He was very smart, and not pushy.” Moreover, he headed the judiciary council, acapella choir, and the association of Presbyterian ministers in-the-making. Despite his involvement in many of the campus' Christian clubs, Alexander insisted that Applewhite was never “fanatically religious.”

Glen Maxwell, a philosophy instructor, was said to have been Applewhite's favorite professor. In addition to introducing Applewhite to Aristotle, Plato, John Locke, and other famous philosophers, Maxwell urged his students to question everything around them. He instilled in them the importance of conducting their own research and seeking answers themselves, and he assured pupils that there was no shame in swimming against the tide when it came to defending their convictions. These exhortations struck a chord with Applewhite and most likely fueled what would become his train of independent thought.

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Applewhite was clearly a very bright young man of many talents, one abounding with promise. The diligence he exhibited in his academics, as well as his extensive involvement in various student societies aside, he was musically gifted and a brilliant orator, effortlessly commanding any stage he graced. He had a passion for opera, but he could hold his own in any genre, including gospels, classical numbers, or show tunes, thanks to his fine elocution and powerful baritone, which was as silvery as it was versatile. He performed in multiple stage productions and was often cast in starring or major supporting roles, such as *Annie Get Your Gun, South Pacific,* and *Oklahoma.*

Applewhite was awarded his bachelor's diploma from Austin College in 1952. Later that year, he married Ann Frances Pearce, another Texan native, who had two children, a son named Mark and a daughter whose name has not been released to the public. The newlyweds relocated to New York shortly after they tied the knot in the hopes that Applewhite could launch a career as a professional singer and actor, but unfortunately, upon being made to grapple with a streak of failed Broadway auditions, his ambitions of becoming a nationally renowned vocalist were quickly dashed. Disheartened and suddenly ambivalent about his life's purpose, he entered the Union Theological Seminary of Virginia in Richmond, where he planned to take a three-year course, the completion of which would grant him ordination in the Presbyterian Church. He took a few courses on theology, as well as the Old and New Testaments for two semesters, undoubtedly with the thought of resigning himself to simply carrying on his father's legacy, but he quickly realized that a life in the ministry, while noble, was not his calling. As such, he withdrew himself from the seminary and moved to the city of Gastonia in North Carolina with his wife.

In Gastonia, Applewhite decided to recalibrate his aspirations and gave his fervent passion for music and theater another whirl. With that, he accepted the posts of music director and assistant to the pastor at the local First Presbyterian Church, for which he received a reasonable salary. He thrived in this new environment, and much of his confidence was restored. He restructured and refined the church choir, and he was supposedly so successful in his endeavors that he helped to boost attendance at Sunday services. A patron of the First Presbyterian, Linda Starnes, harked back to

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Applewhite's brilliance and magnetism in an interview years later. He was, as Starnes described him, “drop-dead handsome...[and] when he got up to sing, looked and sounded like an angel.” She added, “One thing I remembered about him all these years was his eyes and smile. I can see how he would have mesmerized people.”

Applewhite also got along famously with his colleagues. He had an especially close friendship with Edith Warren, who played the organ for the church's children's choir. She, too, praised his mellifluous vocals and arresting stage presence, and she applauded his initiative and superior aptitude for leadership. Edith and her husband also went on regular double-dates with Applewhite and his wife during his two years with the church, which allowed her to see yet another side of him. He was an entertaining conversationalist with a great sense of humor, was comfortable in the kitchen, and had a taste for mutton.

By all accounts, Applewhite appeared to have been a family man. He was devoted to his children and always went out of his way to put a smile on their faces. “He once found a tree and put it in his Volkswagen Beetle,” said Warren. “He put the tree in the living room of his house...painted it white and hung turquoise decorations on it. It wasn't a Christmas tree, just a fun tree for the kids when they were little.”

Applewhite, like other eligible and able-bodied men his age, was conscripted into the army in 1954. He served as an instructor in the Army Signal Corps and was shuffled around during his two years of service in places such as the Austrian city of Salzburg by the German border, as well as White Sands, New Mexico. Fortunately, he was drafted several months after the conclusion of the Korean War, so he never participated in military combat. He was awarded the rank of Sergeant and honorably discharged in 1956.

Following his discharge, Applewhite continued to build his budding career in the domestic music industry. He performed in a few low-budget local musicals in Colorado and Texas, and he signed on as choir director in other churches such as the First Unitarian Church and St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Houston. He also secured the post of assistant music professor at the University of Alabama in 1959, where he remained for at least a year or two.

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Applewhite forged an immediate bond with his students, who were drawn to the professor's ostensible humility and approachability in spite of his stupendous talent and expertise on the subject. For starters, he did not answer to “Mr. Applewhite,” “Mr. Marshall,” or any other formalities, insisting upon being addressed as simply “Herff.” Said Neely Bruce, a former student of Applewhite's at the University of Alabama, “When Herff...came to the university...he didn't look at all like a professor. He was very casual, very laid-back. There was no hint that all this catastrophe was looming in his future...He had a lot of charisma...He would have the audience in the palm of his hand.”

It was during this time that the 28-year-old Applewhite began to express a marked interest in aliens and extraterrestrial life. He penned a few essays about the mysteries of the cosmos, the infinite nature of the universe, and the existence of alien life forms on other planets, some of which he openly shared with his students. Be that as it may, his interest in these subjects, while spirited, still seemed to be contained in the sense that he never overtly pushed his unconventional beliefs on those around him.

Throughout the early 1960s, Applewhite also experimented with other professions outside of the music business, at one point enjoying a stint as an occupational therapist at a tuberculosis sanatorium just outside of Boulder, Colorado. He eventually returned to Houston, where he was employed as director of the music department at the private Basilian-run University of St. Thomas. At the same time, he graduated to the next stage of theatrical stardom, and was cast in 15 productions for the Houston Grand Opera, starring alongside the Spanish operatic icon Placido Domingo in *Faust* and *Carmen*. His performances were met with rave reviews. A critic for *Opera News*, who attended a showing of *Hansel and Gretel* in 1966, in which he played the role of “Father,” praised Applewhite's “resonant, blessedly audible baritone.” He also secured roles in performances staged by the Corpus Christi Symphony, the J.S. Bach Society, and the Houston Symphony.

Unfortunately, Applewhite’s life began to fall apart towards the late 1960s. His marriage soured, and when he and his wife filed for divorce in 1968, the latter was granted full custody of their children. A little over two years later, he suffered nervous breakdowns and psychotic episodes, and he was

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subsequently dismissed from his post at St. Thomas. What triggered his mental health issues remains a matter of debate.

His former student, Bruce, shined a light on one of the rumors that swirled regarding his abrupt departure from the university. Applewhite had apparently been making moves to quit his day job and transition to a full-time resident performer at the Houston Grand Opera. Applewhite was in the midst of a rehearsal for his greatest role yet, the part of Olin Blitch in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*, when he became overwhelmed by the stress of it all and experienced an anxiety attack so severe that he was hospitalized. His father's untimely death in 1971 only exacerbated his problems.

Some surmised that he was merely undergoing an existential crisis, and that his depression had been brought on by the turbulent social and political climate of the United States, left in disarray by the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and other seemingly perennial nationwide crises. The most prominent theory, however, allegedly revolved around Applewhite's unspoken, but well-known struggle with his sexuality, which many believe was the primary cause of the demise of his marriage. It is believed that he was fired when his sexual relationship with a male graduate student was exposed. His Catholic employers, who wanted to distance themselves from the scandal and wrongful dismissal lawsuits, simply attributed the reasons for his sacking to "health problems of an emotional nature."

The involuntary outing and his unexpected expulsion from St. Thomas understandably left Applewhite bitter, confused, and inconsolable. Some say he had been let go from the University of Alabama for similar reasons, and perhaps not surprisingly, considering his strict Christian upbringing and the primitive social norms of the era, he was deeply conflicted and guilt-ridden about his sexual identity. On at least one occasion, he expressed to one of his partners his desire to one day become enlightened enough to enter a genuine, platonic relationship free of all romantic and sexual distractions, one that would last for a lifetime. It wasn't long after this that Applewhite claimed he began to hear voices.

Interestingly enough, when asked about these rumors in an interview conducted in March 1997, Father Patrick Braden, who served as the university president between 1967 and 1979, repudiated all of them. He

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claimed to have no knowledge of Applewhite's homosexuality and further insisted that Applewhite had never even been fired. According to Braden, Applewhite had tendered his resignation voluntarily to seek help for his degenerating mental health.

Whatever the reason, Applewhite's mental faculties became unquestionably compromised. His colleagues at the university, the opera house, and local theater groups alike noticed an alarming change in his behavior – gone was the quick-witted, articulate, and mild-tempered fellow they had come to love and respect, only to be replaced by a nervous, paranoid, and frazzled individual with a perpetually crazed look in his eyes. Things only worsened upon his return from a weekend trip to Galveston Beach, where he had supposedly been struck by a transformative vision extended to him by the Lord Himself. Hayes Parker, a close friend of Applewhite's, recalled, “He said a presence had given him all the knowledge of where the human race had come from and where it was going. It made you laugh to hear it, but Herff was serious.” The mother of Patrick Swayze, Patsy, worked with Applewhite at a local theater production and echoed Hayes' sentiments in a separate interview: “[He had begun] to act strangely, talking about UFOs and preaching this strange religion.” Patsy further noted that Applewhite frequently rambled on about mankind's ignorance to the true meaning of life, as well as the impending apocalypse.

Records reveal that Applewhite was admitted to Houston Hospital in the spring of 1972. According to his sister Louise, he had suffered from a near-fatal heart blockage, which she believed left him with lasting brain damage, thereby cementing his psychosis. Others say that he had checked himself into the psychiatric wing in the hopes of being “cured” of his homosexuality. Either way, most believe it was at this very hospital that he first became acquainted with a 44-year-old nurse by the name of Bonnie Lu Trusdale Nettles. This was confirmed by Applewhite himself years later, though he denied being hospitalized and claimed that he had met the nurse when he was visiting an ailing colleague. Conversely, Nettles' eldest daughter, Terrie, asserted that Applewhite was her older brother's vocal coach at a small theater company in Houston.

Regardless of how they first met, Nettles left an indelible impression on him, to say the least. Nettles, who was four years his senior, graduated from

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the Hermann Hospital School of Professional Nursing in Houston in 1948. Her devout Baptist upbringing notwithstanding, she developed an obsessive interest in a relatively modern pseudoscience known as “Theosophy,” which was essentially a mix of astrology and the occult. Theosophists believed it was possible to make psychic contact with departed souls, and Nettles was inducted into the Houston Lodge of the Theosophical Society in February 1966. She conducted seances, calculated astrological charts, and performed divination readings – often unsolicited – for her family, friends, colleagues, and other believers. Her fixation on the paranormal did nothing to help her floundering marriage with Joseph Segal Nettles and increasingly strained relationship with her four children.

Her clairvoyance and soothsaying abilities, she claimed, were God-given gifts and were perfected through not only decades of practice, but also the guidance of “Brother Francis,” the ghost of a monk who had died in Greece roughly two centuries ago. “He stands beside me when I interpret the charts,” Nettles explained. “There can be several meanings to them, and if I'm wrong, he will correct me.”

Nettles believed that she and Applewhite were destined to cross paths, and that it was literally written in the stars. Several years before, said Nettles, another seer foresaw that she would meet a tall and slender gentleman with fair skin and sandy-blond hair in the year 1972. Lo and behold, Applewhite fit the description to a tee, and unlike many others who would have bolted at the unironic mention of the supernatural, Applewhite was moved by Nettles' unapologetic authenticity and captivated by her bottomless knowledge in these subjects. He supposedly became so excited when she offered him a reading that he leapt up from his seat and raced to his car to fetch a copy of his birth certificate.

Nettles was astounded by the revelatory results of her readings. Applewhite, she declared, was a prophet handpicked by God, and he had been sent on a divine quest to lead his disorientated flock (mankind) away from the dark trail to perdition and back on the path to the Kingdom of Heaven. To be deemed worthy enough to carry out this sacred mission, Applewhite had to cleanse himself of all impurities, including his “unnatural” sexual urges, and liberate himself from all unnecessary burdens.

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Given all that, some believe that Applewhite, who became the face of the cult, was an unwitting pawn who had been manipulated to do Nettles' bidding. However, it might be fair to argue that both were equally troubled, and they mutually enabled and fostered the delusions of each other. Indeed, Applewhite claimed that he began to see Brother Francis himself shortly thereafter.

Regardless of where they met, Applewhite and Nettles quickly became inseparable and wholly dependent on one another. Their intense bond, which became stronger with each passing day, far surpassed one of normal friendship, but their relationship reportedly remained completely platonic. The one-year anniversary of their first meeting and ensuing “union,” so to speak, would coincide with the passing of the Comet Kohoutek, first sighted on March 7, 1973. Throughout the years, the dubious duo adopted a number of monikers, dubbing themselves “Bo and Peep” (a reference to their mission to round up aimless sheep), “Winnie and Pooh,” “Tiddly and Wink,” “Guinea and Pig,” “Do and Ti,” or simply, “The Two.”

A 1974 picture of Comet Kohoutek

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Odd fantasies aside, they completed one another in a sense. Eli Ewing, author of *Heaven's Gate Website: The Group is Gone, the Religion Lives On*, explained, “They each had strengths that they brought to the pairing – Applewhite with his dreams, visions, and out-of-body experiences, and Nettles with her explanations of dreams [and visions].” “I felt I had known her forever,” Applewhite later said of his partner. This was a sentiment that Nettles requited, saying, “We have known each other in previous lives.”

Both Louise and Applewhite's ex-wife Pearce exerted every effort to steer him away from Nettles, utilizing logic and scientific reasoning. When those failed, they cited Biblical passages that contradicted Nettles' ludicrous claims, but all the efforts were to no avail. Just weeks later, Applewhite severed all ties with his ex-wife, children, siblings, relatives, and friends, and he fully committed himself wholeheartedly to his heavenly quest.

He traveled to Dallas and knocked on Louise's door unannounced to deliver the worrying news. Naturally, Louise begged him to reconsider. “I said to him, 'What's the matter with you? That's not the real you,' His response was, 'You just don't know the real me.'”

Meanwhile, Nettles' husband divorced her, and she promptly lost custody of all her children.

The Mission

Applewhite and Nettles, who quit her nursing job without giving notice, pooled all their savings together and erected the Christian Art Center, a “metaphysical bookstore” within the First Unitarian Church in downtown Houston. Most days, Nettles manned the counter, peddling literature on religion, philosophy, art, and music, as well as the occult and other esoteric subjects. About a month later, the duo established a spiritual center known as the “Know Place,” which provided intimate classes on Theosophy and other forms of mysticism. Applewhite supposedly moonlighted as a music director at the church to fund these ventures and to cover the couple's basic expenses.

Business was abysmal, and the proprietors of these enterprises hemorrhaged an increasing amount of cash every month. It was clear they were in need of a new plan, and to them, it made no sense to wait for their future disciples to stumble upon them on their own, particularly if they were

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to operate out of such an obscure location. Instead, to spread their gospel and build a following as quickly and as efficiently as possible, they had to step out of their comfort zones and deliver their message to the masses themselves. As such, on January 1, 1973, they shuttered the bookstore and spiritual center and dropped the keys into the landlord's mailbox.

The duo subsequently moved into a vacant room for rent at a small ranch house in the Texas Hill Country and locked themselves in their room for the next six weeks, only venturing out once a day to grab some food from the canteen. For hours on end, they meditated, consulted astrological charts, and channeled spirits through seances for guidance to purify their auras. They deliberately avoided alcohol, cigarettes, and sexual intercourse, so as to reboot the "programming" of their bodies, which they referred to as "vehicles." When they finally resurfaced from their self-assigned isolation, they donated all their material possessions and excess cash – barring a change of clothes or two, a single pair of shoes each, and an old sports car – to nearby shelters and charity organizations. After that, they purchased a medium-sized tent and some camping gear.

The cryptic couple next set off on their cross-country journey in mid-February of 1973. They lived like common vagrants, usually camping in parks overnight, and when they managed to score a motel room, they snuck out the rear entrance without footing the bill. They typically ate nothing but bread rolls, swiped food from grocery stores, only drank plain water, and dined and dashed regularly. They extenuated these acts of petty theft by chalking them up to a test from God, and they showed little remorse as they believed themselves to be exempt from human laws.

As Applewhite and Nettles flitted from one city to the next in search of followers, the pair visited local libraries, where they studied hagiographies centered on St. Francis of Assisi, among other saints, and memorized passages from the New Testament in their battered copy of the King James Bible. They pored over books on Theosophy authored by the religion's co-founder, Helena Blavatsky, as well as literature on asceticism, Christology, existential philosophy, and other related schools of thought. Applewhite, ever the avid reader, also devoured science fiction novels, in particular the works of Arthur C. Clarke and Robert Heinlein. He also watched reruns of *Star Trek*, which debuted in 1966, religiously.

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Blavatsky

In May 1974, the couple managed to persuade an old mutual friend from Houston, through a series of letters, to embrace their teachings. This woman would become their first recruit, and with that, their cult got its start.

Applewhite and Nettles happened upon yet another game-changing revelation two months later. The couple was camping by the Oregonian city of Gold Beach, leafing through the Book of Revelation, when it suddenly dawned on them that the telltale passage, found in Chapter 11, offered instructions: “And I will empower my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. These witnesses are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord...If anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouths and devours their enemies. In this way, anyone who wants to harm them must be killed...When the two

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witnesses have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will wage war with them, and will overpower and kill them...But after three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered the two witnesses, and they stood on their feet...And the witnesses heard a loud voice from Heaven saying, 'Come up here.' And they went up to heaven in a cloud as their enemies watched them..."

Applewhite and Nettles came to the conclusion that they were the two witnesses referenced in Revelation, and they became resolved to fulfill the Biblical prophecy, no matter the cost. The reinvigorated duo took pen to paper and composed a pamphlet in which they claimed that Christ had been reincarnated in Texas, his new vessel was Applewhite, and that Applewhite and Nettles had been chosen to carry out God's will as dictated in the Book of Revelation.

These were arguably among the least bizarre of their declarations. Applewhite in particular was an ardent proponent of the "ancient astronauts" or "ancient aliens" theory, which maintained that Martians visited Earth millions of years ago and populated the Earth with its first humans, and that these godly extraterrestrial life forms would one day return to the planet and retrieve only the worthiest of souls. Applewhite became convinced that God was, in fact, an almighty alien, and he surmised that the extraterrestrial spirit that once occupied Christ now resided in his "vehicle." Furthermore, Applewhite and Nettles warned that doomsday was fast approaching, which they referred to as "The Demonstration." On this day, they would lead the charge against the demonic beasts and hounds released from Hell, whom they named the "Luciferians." Though they would emerge victorious, they, too, would perish, but they would be brought back to life, whereupon they would board a flying saucer and be whisked off to the Kingdom of God. They reiterated that only their most loyal, committed, and pure-hearted followers would be able to transcend alongside them to the "Next Level."

Applewhite, Nettles, and their convert distributed these pamphlets at each one of their stops and spoke at local churches and spiritual workshops, during which they introduced themselves as "The Two" or "The UFO Two." To their dismay, their ideas were poorly received at best, and their efforts were further thwarted by another pitfall on August 28, 1974 when Applewhite failed to pull over when flagged by state troopers in Harlingen,

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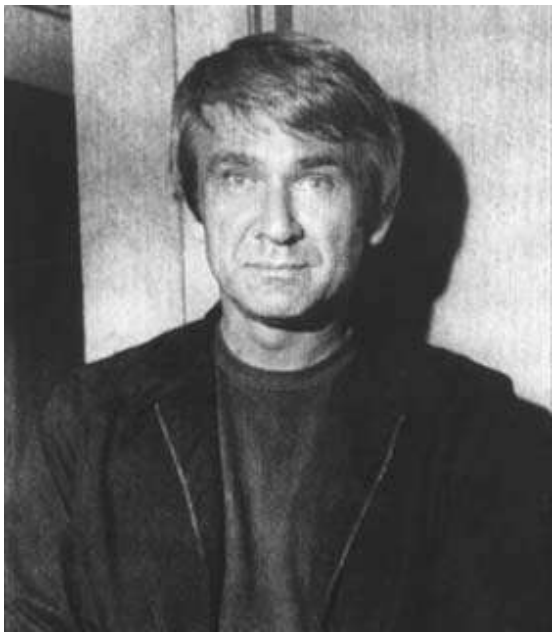
Texas and proceeded to lead the police on a high-speed chase. When Applewhite was eventually cornered, he was arrested for theft of a rental car. Nettles, in the passenger seat, was also apprehended after the cops found a number of stolen cards in her possession. She was charged with credit card fraud.

Their mugshots were a sight to behold. Applewhite appeared far older than his 43 years of age. He was gaunt, with wrinkled cheeks and disheveled hair that was generously streaked with grays and whites, a far cry from the attractive and well-groomed youngster he once was. Nettles' mugshot showed an overweight, drab-looking woman with crudely cropped hair. Like Applewhite, she was hardly recognizable compared to past photographs.



Applewhite in the 1970s

The charges against Nettles were quickly cleared, but Applewhite, on the other hand, was detained and later extradited to St. Louis. There, Applewhite refused to admit to any wrongdoing, and according to public defender Tim Braun, he contended that “a force from beyond the Earth made [him] keep [the stolen] car.” Obviously, Applewhite's defense did nothing to help his case, and he was given a four-month or six-month sentence, which he served in the St. Louis county jail.

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He made use of his time behind bars, continuing to research and flesh out their purpose and objectives in another essay. In the meantime, Nettles slipped back into her nurse scrubs, taking up a post at a small hospital in Houston. She quit her job upon Applewhite's release, used her earnings to purchase a used car and other camping essentials, and got back on the road.

It is only fair to note that the two had no intention of becoming persistent thieves and career squatters, and they apparently attempted to make an honest living to fund their divine quest on several occasions. At one point, they opened a delicatessen and sandwich shop called “Sunshine Company” in Taos, New Mexico, supposedly financed by a small bundle of insurance money they won from a car accident. They then crafted homemade crosses that they sold to a mom-and-pop Christian gift shop in Las Vegas. When their car broke down in Portland, Oregon some weeks later, they pawned off what little possessions they had to spare, took up a temporary job excavating septic tanks, and acquired another used car. After they were unable to find seasonal work, they panhandled, borrowed, accepted donations from magnanimous civilians, and sold blood and other bodily fluids wherever they could.

In time, the precariousness and laboriousness of their nomadic lifestyle began to take its toll on them. After some contemplation, The Two decided to renounce their usage of credit cards and rental cars, which they branded “tools of the Devil,” and with the clock steadily ticking, they concluded that it was time to ramp up their gospel-spreading endeavors. Undeterred by their past stumbling blocks, they continued to produce more flyers, posters, and other advertisements for initiatory meetings, desperately hoping to expand their “crew.” They originally christened themselves the “Anonymous Sexaholics Celibate Church,” but they eventually took into account the negative feedback on their name, which many found to be unappealing and aggressive, and rebranded themselves the “Human Individual Metamorphosis.” Only much later was their name shortened to “Heaven's Gate.”

The reinvention of their image, as well as the refinement of their mission statement, paid off, as the attendance at these meetings began to soar. Prospective initiates learned that they were in the presence of hallowed, extraterrestrial representatives beamed down from Heaven, one of whom

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was the second coming of Christ, and that they had been instructed to amass a flock and escort them to the Next Level. They called their quest an “experiment” and jointly referred to themselves as “Guinea and Pig.” Applewhite, the “lab instructor,” did the bulk of the speaking, while Nettles chimed in intermittently with supplementary comments. The Two rarely conversed with the participants at length and only briefly acknowledged those who offered up their phone numbers, promising to reach out to them soon.

By March 1975, Applewhite, Nettles, and their first member had moved onto Ojai, located roughly 85 miles northwest of Los Angeles. In Ojai, they handed out copies of the wordy exposition Applewhite had written in his cell the previous year. An excerpt regarding Applewhite's thoughts on human metamorphosis and transcendence reads, “A member of the next kingdom finds favor with one who is willing to endure all of the necessary growing pains of weaning himself totally from his human condition...The idea that a good life leads to heaven is as silly as believing that if a caterpillar 'dies a good caterpillar, it will mysteriously awaken in a rose blossom and live there forever with the king butterfly.' People, like caterpillars, must go through a chrysalis stage, [discarding their old shells and] overcoming their humanness in preparation for life in the Next Level...”

It's unclear whether they believed these New Age metaphors and alternative, mystic words would be popular among Californians, but their message hit home with numerous residents in these parts. Two new recruits were added, a mother and her adult daughter, and the following month, a group of 80-100 people who learned of the meeting through the posters plastered all over town gathered at the spacious Hollywood Hills home of another potential convert named Joan Culpepper. The attendees were mesmerized by the simplicity of the oddly charming duo, clad in old sweatpants and muddy desert boots, and enthralled by the novelty and candidness of their pitch, which was peppered with *Star Trek* terminology. They were even more stunned when the extraterrestrial Christ incarnate claimed that his alien superiors had been communicating with him via the popular television show. “They laid it all out clearly,” Culpepper later recalled. “They were tough. They said that they would die or be assassinated,

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and that those who decided to follow them would travel to a high level of existence with the help of a spaceship."

Interested parties were asked to fill out a questionnaire that would help determine whether they were ready for their exhaustive "personal transformation." The following are a few of the questions listed:

"1. Can you follow instructions without adding your own interpretation?

2. Can you deliver instructions as you receive them, or do they change according to your computer?

6. Do you put tasks off – procrastinate?

8. Do you use more of something than is adequate (e.g. excessively high cooking flame, more toothpaste than necessary, etc.)?

10. Are you sensitive when approaching another individual about something you want to discuss? Do you permit that individual the choice to continue what he is doing, or do you force him to drop it in order to give attention to you?"

Remarkably, 24 of the attendees agreed to meet Applewhite and Nettles in Gold Beach in a fortnight. Among these new recruits were Jacqueline Leonard, a beloved grandmother from Iowa who would become the oldest member of the cult, as well as a former model-turned-homemaker named Judith Rowland and an 18-year-old Air Force pilot trainee named Dick Joslyn. Other converts included a traveling salesman, a television producer, and a certified public accountant.

On May 5, 1975, the two dozen new recruits, who had sold off all their possessions and abandoned their homes during the past two weeks, assembled at their meeting place in Gold Beach as promised, ready to take on the quest for a higher level of existence and to fully immerse themselves in the teachings of Applewhite and Nettles. It was at this stage that the leaders asked to be addressed as "Bo and Peep," the divine shepherds of their growing flock. The "crew" joined Bo and Peep on their cross-country travels, touring other parts of Oregon before heading on to Medicine Bow, Wyoming, the Bonny Reservoir area in Colorado, and remote towns in

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Washington. They invited new recruits and locals unversed in their cause to attend their mobile “classrooms” for a better grasp of their cause.

In short order, Applewhite and Nettles were given a taste of internal dissension for the first time when Culpepper and a handful of other recruits began to take issue with the cult's puritanical rules and warped idea of discipline. Nettled by the constant barrage of questions and growingly caustic remarks, Applewhite and Nettles made the decision to remove Culpepper and other non-compliant members, leaving them stranded in Sedona, Arizona. Culpepper was livid at having been forsaken by these supposedly enlightened individuals, and she took it upon herself to track them down and show up at their recruitment meetings. She pressed them for answers for several months, racked with guilt at having roped her friends into what she now believed to be an extremely dangerous cult. As Culpepper put it, “The last time I saw them was about 1976 in Salt Lake City. When I walked in that night, the two of them just got up and left. They saw me as their Judas and thought that I was going to kill them.”

Culpepper eventually halted the futile pursuit and took other steps to secure the closure that she sought. She went on to establish two halfway houses to help former cult members such as herself to get back on their feet. The first asylum, located in Los Angeles' Topanga Canyon, was dedicated to ex-members of Heaven's Gate, and the second, erected in San Francisco, aided runaways from the Peoples Temple.

Meanwhile, Applewhite and Nettles did not allow themselves to become discouraged by the mounting setbacks, and they kept their eyes firmly fixed on the prize. The roving cult forged on with their trek across the West Coast, and whenever funds were running low, they settled in remote countryside towns for several weeks. Some members acquired temporary positions as restaurant servers, store clerks, deliverymen, and other minimum-wage jobs. Some knocked on the doors of local churches and requested monetary donations. Others set up shop on street corners and relied on the kindness of strangers for food and gas money.

In the late summer of 1975, the crew set their sights on the famously liberal and “alternative” crowd in the Bay Area. They churned out more flyers, printed on bright red paper, and personally delivered notices to the

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offices of local publications. Many of these posters targeted Bay Area colleges, and one such poster addressing the students and faculty of the University of San Francisco bore the title “UFO's [sic] in San Francisco Area” in big, bolded letters with the following byline: “Why they are here; who they have come for; [and] when will they land.” The body of the text contained a brief introduction of the agenda, as well as a misleading disclaimer:

> “Two individuals say they were sent from the level above human, and will return to that level in a spaceship (UFO) within the next [three] months. This man and woman will discuss how the transition from the human level to the next level is accomplished, and when this may be done.
>
> “This is not a religious or philosophical organization recruiting membership. However, the information has already prompted a number of individuals to devote their total energy to the transitional process. If you have ever entertained the idea that there might be a real PHYSICAL level in space beyond the Earth's confines, you will want to attend this meeting.”

To the disappointment of those who responded to these flyers, The Two only made an appearance at the first meeting on the circuit, which was held at Cañada College in Redwood City on August 25. A number of gatherings were scheduled for the same day (the event advertised on the flyer above, for instance, was also set for August 25), and cult members representing The Two were tasked with speaking at the other assemblies, also held in the auditoriums of Stanford University, San Francisco State, and the Sunnyvale Civic Center. These meetings were a smash hit, attracting an average of 800 people each.

To be fair, many, if not most of those who showed did so expecting a laugh or to be entertained by some strange spectacle. There was, however, no pageantry involved - it was merely a seemingly run-of-the-mill forum, presented by two speakers seated behind a cheap plastic table. It would have been a rather dull event, too, had it not been for the subject matter at hand.

Those who expressed genuine interest in the subject matter were split into two camps. Some were turned off by the manner in which the speakers

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delivered their message, which they thought to be borderline belligerent. “The pitch is like that of a used-car salesman,” remarked Peter Edler, who attended a meeting on the Tiburon campus of San Francisco State. “If you don't buy now, you'll never get a deal like this again...They [even] had enough nerve to tell me to leave my kids behind.”

For others, particularly those who saw Applewhite in the flesh, it was a life-changing experience. His comportment, to start with, was inexplicably hypnotic. He was, as he claimed, a sapient, otherworldly being who possessed unimaginable powers and held the key to all of life's previously unanswerable questions. Some attendees, who soon became converts, insisted that all thoughts and mental images immediately vanished from their minds the moment he walked past them. One convert, who later withdrew himself from the cult, even went so far as to claim that he had an out-of-body episode when Applewhite laid a hand on his shoulder. According to him, he had momentarily been transported to the cockpit of a flying saucer, an experience so crystal-clear and palpable that he could feel one of the control levers in his grasp.

Another pivotal seminar led by Applewhite and Nettles took place on September 14. 200 interested parties congregated at the Fir Room of the Bayshore Inn in Waldport, Oregon, for which a “Mr. Simons” paid $50 for the hour. Like the fresh converts from the Bay Area colleges, the audience was bewitched by Applewhite's mysteriously entrancing demeanor. One attendee described the “strange, shiny look” of his glacial blue eyes, “almost as if they were sightless.” She added, “His speech sounded as if it were being played on a machine and was turned on and off automatically...He didn't seem to blink his eyes at any time except to tip his head back at regular intervals and half-close both eyes. A robot was the only comparison I could make.”

The audience listened with rapt attention as the duo urged those who fit the mold to consider this once-in-a-millennium opportunity. Some attendees later reported seeing a mystifying, flickering halo of light dancing around the speakers' heads, but a few were unnerved by what they described as a lingering “aura of death” hovering above them. Their discomfort only heightened when the orators informed them that they had been “marked for death” with the nonchalance of one recounting what they had for breakfast

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that morning, and that they were fully prepared to “return to the Next Level.” The Demonstration and subsequent departure for their home planet, they announced, would unfold in a week's time.

Seven days later, dozens of people met on a windswept clifftop at the Colorado National Monument park, a large fraction of them familiar faces from Bayshore Inn. There, they waited patiently – hour after hour, then day after day – for a majestic, iridescent spaceship to descend from the open sky. Needless to say, a celestial spacecraft never arrived, but even as the crowd did begin to thin out at various points, The Two miraculously managed to recruit another 20-30 people. A member who identified himself only as “Sawyer” claimed there were as many as 34 who remained. The new recruits, as per the cult's laws, relinquished their homes and possessions, ditched their jobs (many of them high-paid, prestigious posts), and abruptly bade farewell to their loved ones, completely jettisoning their former lives for their new family.

The tremendous turnouts at Bayshore and past venues had attracted no media coverage, but the news that over 20 Waldeport locals simply left without warning generated a whirlwind of negative publicity. Along with local media, national TV programs such as *CBS Evening News* and publications like *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* covered the incident. Confused journalists wondered why normal people, some of whom had wealth, would forsake their lives for such an absurd cause. Robert Rubin, for example, reportedly signed away four houses, a farmhouse, and seven plots of land measuring 10 acres total. Applewhite and Nettles were depicted in an unflattering light, with some speculating that brainwashing and pressure tactics were at play. Weeks later, however, other publications challenged the authors of these sensational articles, accusing them of blowing things out of proportion and eliciting hysteria just to plump up sales.

On Halloween, over 100 crew members and potential converts from at least 23 states – this time along with a smattering of reporters – convened once again at Tilden Park in Berkeley. The congregation proceeded over to the marshy ground alongside Lake Anza, where they were greeted by a Heaven's Gate representative. He revealed that The Two, sadly, were unable to grace them with their presence, as they were “preparing to be assassinated or killed” within the next couple of weeks. He encouraged the attendees to

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take a cue from the leaders and provided them with instructions on how to best reprogram their vehicles. According to Mark Trautwein of the *Berkeley Gazette*, multiple crew members were certain that they could sense the "chemical changes" rippling throughout their mortal shells, which would "render them unrecognizable when aboard the spaceship."

No such spaceship ever came, but the string of false prophecies that followed, one of which was set for the eruption of Mount St. Helens in 1980, did nothing to shatter the faith that the majority of the members had in The Two. In fact, the cult continued to grow, and members respected the duo's transparency. Applewhite and Nettles always extended heartfelt apologies for miscalculating the date of The Demonstration, and they reminded their followers that they were free to leave at any time. When Joslyn chose to part ways with the group 15 years after his induction, Applewhite personally thanked Joslyn for his years of service, reassured him that there would be no hard feelings, and even paid for his bus ticket to Florida, a gesture that deeply moved him.

A Day in the Life

By the time *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary,* a comprehensive account of Heaven's Gate and the cult's leaders written by Brad Steiger and Hayden C. Hewes, hit the shelves in early 1976 and propelled the cult's fame to even greater heights, the crew already consisted of over 200 international members. However, rather than capitalize on their celebrity, Nettles proclaimed at a meeting in Kansas on April 21 that the "Harvest" had officially come to a close, meaning that they were no longer accepting new recruits. The next year, core membership dropped to roughly 70, and in the years that followed, it dropped under 50.

Applewhite and Nettles, who now went by "Do" and "Ti," appeared to have been unfazed by the substantial drop in their numbers. In their opinion, God was doing them a favor by weeding out the undeserving frauds and weakest links from the group. Life was indeed often grueling for those who remained, but they dutifully kept the faith, for they believed in the deepest depths of their hearts that the payoff would be worth it.

All in all, members ranged from their 20s to 70s and mostly hailed from states with the most UFO sightings per capita, specifically New Mexico,

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Texas, and Colorado. Many were once promising, productive members of the community until a traumatic event sent their lives into a tailspin. One of them was Julie LaMontagne, a former nursing student who graduated magna cum laude from the University of Massachusettes in 1974 before losing her best friend in a drowning accident and her father Jules to cancer in the same year. Similarly, Margaret Field, a talented public speaker and majorette, was crowned valedictorian of Las Plumas High School in 1969. She was a wildly popular student, and her peers once predicted that she would be governor or even president. She went on to graduate from Berkeley and was awarded a master's degree in computer science from UCLA, but her short-lived marriage left her in emotional dispair.

There were some whose initiation into the cult left their loved ones utterly dumbfounded. Michael Barr Sandoe, the extroverted but urbane son of an evangelical pastor, was affectionately remembered as the class clown and ambitious senior class president, and prior to joining the cult, he received numerous accolades for his service as a Desert Storm infantry paratrooper. The Minnesota-born Joyce Skalla, an ex-beauty queen, was married to a high-ranking Navy officer and a mother to two gorgeous twin daughters. She returned to school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, acquired a journalism degree, and served as coordinator for Byrd Community School before transitioning into a local TV personality. Skalla gave all of that up less than 48 hours after attending a Heaven's Gate meeting.

John Craig, an affluent businessman whose multiple properties included one of the largest dude ranches in all of Colorado, appeared to have been happily married and was a doting father of six. When his wife and kids returned from a swim meet held two towns over one July evening in 1975, they were horrified to discover that the patriarch – who had brought with him only a spare set of clothes, a small wad of cash, and his Chevy – was long gone. All he left behind was an emotionless note containing instructions on how to access his personal and business bank accounts.

Ladonna Brugato, whose sole quirk was the altar of crystals and candles next to her bed, was yet another who seemingly disappeared out-of-the-blue in 1994. Her landlord, Al Wallace, noted, “If you met her on the street, she would have been the girl-next-door who was simply trying to get by as a

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single mom. You never would have imagined that it could have gone this far...”

In the late 1970s, the cult began to take longer breaks from their itinerant lifestyle and settled down in various places for longer stretches of time. The cult was mainly funded by the $300,000 inheritance bequeathed to two of the crew members following the death of their family members, which they used to rent a few houses at a time, first in Denver, and later in Dallas-Fort Worth. Nearby residents gossiped about the peculiar behavior of the new tenants, who preferred to remain indoors behind closed curtains. From the outside looking in, it is difficult to imagine why anyone would willingly choose to live under such austere conditions. The fact that these followers chose to stay and willingly entertained their leaders' every whim was a true testament of their undying faith in The Two, as well as the power that they wielded over their disciples.

As noted above, members were made to surrender all their worldly possessions and strip themselves of their former identities completely, which at that time meant putting some parentless children up for adoption. They were to cease all communication with their family members and friends, effective immediately, excluding the occasional vaguely worded postcard. They were expected to forgo jewelry, facial hair, and other forms of personal expression, instead adopting near-identical buzzed and closely cropped hairstyles. To strengthen this illusion of “unity” further, each member was forced to renounce their human names and were assigned new appellations upon their arrival. All new names were six letters long and capitalized, consisting of a random collection of three letters followed by the suffix “ODY.”

The cult adopted a strict dress code featuring dull, gender-neutral clothing in monochromatic colors. In the early days, members styled themselves in baggy, plain black clothes from head to toe, and they later began to don shapeless, gray, collarless tops so as to “emphasize modesty, comfort, and utilitarian value.” More significantly, their fashion sense emulated the clothing style worn by the “Gray.” the alien species that they would evolve into once they shed their mortal shells. Artistic renderings of a “Gray” alien – a bald, gray-skinned, androgynous life form with an oversized dome and giant, glassy black eyes, sporting a skintight silver spacesuit – were tacked

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onto the walls of these otherwise colorless and sparsely-furnished rental homes, representing the only decorations allowed on the premises.

This was unlike any stereotypical New Age cult, which usually championed free love and openly endorsed carnal relations, polyamory, alcohol, and drugs. Sexual intercourse, boozing, smoking, and anything else deemed a poisonous act or crutch – which, to the cult, included all negative emotions and thoughts – were prohibited. Corporeal desires and unhealthy vices, The Two reasoned, would only distract them from their mission. Some believed that the forced celibacy was a product of Applewhite's suppressed homosexuality. Others believe that the cult simply intended to live their lives as dictated by the anatomy and bodily functions of extraterrestrials. A common belief found in many UFO circles suggested that aliens were born without vocal chords and sexual organs, and therefore would have no sex drive.

On a related note, a partner was appointed for every member, supposedly according to whoever the member would find the least attractive. In a later interview, former member Leslie Light remembered her horror when a "crazy street person" had been assigned to her. These pairs were practically joined at the hip for 24 hours a day and were tasked with monitoring the other's behavior and activities. Members rotated partners approximately every six weeks as an extra precaution so as to keep the possibility of developing romantic feelings or excessively affectionate (even if platonic) feelings for one's partner at a minimum.

Applewhite was so zealous about his commitment to asceticism that he not only banned the act of hugging but even had himself surgically castrated. At least seven other members followed suit, doing so of their own volition. Initially, they tried to perform these operations in-house, and perhaps not surprisingly, their first attempt on Steven McCarter, now known as "SRRODY," resulted in a trip to the emergency room. Another member was allegedly instructed to toss SRRODY's testicles into the water of a nearby pier to eliminate the evidence. Due to this disastrous first attempt, later castrations were performed by former doctors and nurses in sketchy warehouses and other remotely located non-medical facilities.

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The Two apparently justified this self-mutilation by citing Matthew 19:12, which reads, “There are eunuchs who are born so from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who are made so by men; and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let him accept it who can.” Another former member explained the cult's rationale further in an email sent to *Vice*: “As far as emotional human trappings, it was a difficult experience to shed all those things that are hard-wired into the flesh and blood, and also nurtured by human methods of raising children. It takes constant alert to not allow automatic reactions and habits to play out.”

In addition to extensively detailed, tightly-packed timetables for daily chores and tasks, designed as such to keep their impure thoughts and natural urges at arm's length, The Two also drew up comprehensive dietary schedules for themselves, as well as the crew. Their eating habits were exceptionally clean, actively avoiding all sugary drinks excluding fruit juices, as well as fried foodstuffs. Their diets were rich with multivitamins. Plainly put, they found no enjoyment in their cuisine and only ate to sustain themselves and to minimize the pollutants within their vehicles.

Sometimes, the manner in which they consumed their food was unhealthy. Members, for instance, often underwent week-long juice cleanses, but mostly, as one member recounted, they believed that “moderation in small amounts of meat, chicken, and lots of vegetables and grains was key,” as it “provided a balance that could supply [them] with the energy to work at our regular jobs while supplying the mental alertness to keep our focus and direction.”

A treatise published by Applewhite, *Transfiguration Diet*, featured the dietary schedules and recipes the crew utilized, along with a collection of rough hand-drawn drawings of aliens in the kitchen. The Sunday timetable was as follows: “For breakfast, members were given a choice of wheat berries (honey and raisins) or an assorted fruit bowl. For lunch, served at 12:30, they tucked into a raw salad medley composed of lettuce, spinach, cucumber, broccoli, sprouts, carrots, and peas drizzled with olive oil, garlic, or vinegar dressing. At 14:30 sharp, members chugged four ounces of grape juice diluted in equal part water. Precisely an hour later, they snacked on two

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pears. At 17:10, the crew ingested six ounces of water mixed with a teaspoon of Cayenne. This was chased down by another teaspoon of wheat germ oil 10 minutes later. Then, at 17:30, they were served potato soup with a lettuce-and-spinach salad on the side, along with steamed corn, broccoli with a lemon wedge, and a baked potato garnished with green pepper, beets, and green beans. At 19:30, they swallowed a single red clover capsule, followed by a tablespoon of Molasses at 20:30, and three more capsules of Naturalax II at 21:30."

To their credit, The Two were a lot of things, but they weren't hypocrites. They adhered to an even stricter dietary schedule, timed to the minute. The following is a glimpse into Nettles' distinctive schedule, as shared by one of the members: "At 5:57PM, Nettles bathed. 24 minutes later, she took a vitamin pill, one of 32 consumed every 24 hours. At 6:36, she drank a liquid protein formula, and one hour later, she ate a cinnamon roll. At 9:54, she was back in bed for another two hours."

Entertainment was also rigorously regulated. Members were forbidden from reading unapproved books, newspapers, and other publications, and they were not to tune into radio and television news broadcasts, so as to keep them in the dark on current affairs. Only television programs selected by Applewhite, primarily *Star Trek, Star Wars, X-Files,* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, were screened on the communal 72-inch TV. As fate would have it, Thomas Nichols, one of The Two's most faithful followers, was the brother of actress Nichelle Nichols, who played Lieutenant Nyota Uhura in the original *Star Trek* series and movies.

The inordinate stringency and specificity of The Two's rules were not without their purposes, as they progressively pushed the boundaries of the members' obedience and loyalty. On movie nights, for starters, members were made to arrange themselves according to a seating chart. No one could leave the premises without their partners, with the exception of those who held jobs, and even they were required to sign out from a logbook each time, during which they would be given their license and car keys. Moreover, they were expected to undergo severe meditative periods The Two called "tomb time," during which members were prohibited from speaking, even to their partners, for several days at a time. Partners also tapped tuning forks on one another's heads for hours on end, so as to declutter their minds. Those who

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could not cut it were ejected from the cult immediately, and at one point, as many as 19 members were collectively expelled as a result.

Occasionally, Applewhite and Nettles saddled members with impromptu tasks that were as onerous as they were pointless, supposedly to test their fidelity to the cause. When the cult was stationed in Texas, The Two ordered all their members to stand outside under the open sky overnight, leaving them exposed to the elements – during which they were instructed to remain upright at all times – to welcome an incoming spaceship, which they believed to be the real deal. The group was finally summoned back to the house the following afternoon and congratulated for completing "the drill."

Under these punishing circumstances, members became totally reliant on their leaders and incessantly sought their approval. The Two were fully aware of the psychological hold they had on their disciples and employed other manipulation tactics to further solidify this codependency. *People* magazine contributor Laura Barcella explained, "[One time, Applewhite] and Nettles...called a meeting, which several members failed to attend. Rather than browbeat their recalcitrant underlings, The Two announced, sadly, that they were going to leave the group for a time to meditate on why they had failed in their leadership. When they returned hours later, members wept with shame and relief."

The oppressive rigidity of these routines began to slacken in later years. As emotionless as Applewhite and Nettles strove to be, they often exhibited flashes of human compassion, and even in the early days, they were known to make allowances for special cases. Grandma Leonard, for one, was permitted to correspond with her family on a regular basis, and in 1982, this "privilege" was extended to the other cult members, who were now entitled to short telephone calls with former loved ones. The following year, members who so wished were granted permission to reunite with family members for Mother's Day, under the condition that their trip be restricted to two days. They were also made to parrot the same cover story, in which they claimed that they had entered a distant monastery and were studying computers, hence their odd haircuts and clothes. This was, by most accounts, a believable alibi since many members had certified backgrounds in computer science and engineering, and as brief and rare as these short trips,

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phone calls, and letters back home were, they helped to alleviate the concerns of their families.

The cult reached a turning point on June 19, 1985, when Nettles, whose eye had been removed due to complications from liver cancer two years prior, succumbed to her illness. As might be expected, Nettles' death devastated Applewhite, who was unable to process her death and suffered even greater levels of psychosis. The core group, whose numbers had dwindled to 39, were equally floored by Ti's demise. “We were all devastated, most of all Do,” said ex-member Frank Lyford, also known as ANDODY. “How could this happen?...We were all supposed to graduate together.” All members except for one remained by Applewhite's side and made every effort to lift his spirits and redirect him back to their cause.

Applewhite eventually regained his composure, at least to some extent, but due to Nettles' untimely departure, the ideology that they had worked so hard to craft was falling apart at the seams. He returned to the drawing board and unveiled the crucial adjustments he made to their philosophy weeks later. Do, he announced, had no choice but to ascend to the Next Level, as she had been bursting with “too much energy to remain on Earth.” She had already reached the pinnacle of enlightenment, Applewhite continued, and thus, their alien overlords decided to expedite her homecoming. On the other hand, he lagged several stages behind, and as such, his time had not yet come. Do was now eagerly waiting for their reunion, which was why they were in need of a proper plan that would ensure their simultaneous graduation, as they had originally intended. As a symbol of his imperishable commitment to his disciples, Applewhite purchased 39 gold bands, priced at $100 apiece, and wedded each one of them in a private ceremony.

The Departure

Heaven's Gate retreated into the shadows of obscurity towards the end of the 1980s and remained in such a dormant state for years that many on the outside erroneously assumed that they had gone extinct. The cult only reemerged from their seeming retirement in 1992, during which they renamed themselves “Total Overcomers Anonymous” and debuted a video series of their creation entitled *Beyond Human – The Last Call.* The segments had been filmed the previous year, and they essentially served as a

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longer, glorified introductory and recruitment video. On May 27, 1993, *USA Today* printed an advertisement sent in by cult members under the headline "UFO Cult Resurfaces with Final Offer." The day of reckoning, they warned, was upon them, and the entire human civilization would soon be "recycled."

Given how they lived, it is shocking that the cult's members were technological pioneers in the sense that Heaven's Gate was one of the first organizations to utilize the Internet to spread their message around the globe. The Heaven's Gate official website was developed under the cult's own accredited company, the aptly named "Higher Source Contract Enterprises." The team consisted of trained tech specialists who designed and coded websites, as well as produced original digital graphics for companies in various languages. A former member claimed, "Chances are your cellular phone or pager company [used] programs designed by our team of professionals. So do many banks and other major corporations." Their earnings were substantial enough that other members who previously had full-time jobs no longer needed the employment.

The cult marketed their web development and graphic design services under "The Difference" tab on their website. It read, "The individuals at the core of our group have worked closely together for over 20 years. During these years, each of us have developed a high degree of skill and know-how through personal discipline and concerted effort...[You can trust us to] provide advanced solutions at highly competitive rates." In January 1994, the group embarked on one last cross-country recruitment tour, stopping at 63 cities and towns across 22 states, which concluded in Boston.

The fateful sign Applewhite had so urgently yearned for came a year and a half later. This sign came in the form of the Comet Hale-Bopp, which was discovered by a pair of amateur astronomers named Alan Hale and Thomas Bopp on July 23, 1995. The passing of the comet was truly an unparalleled, glorious affair for the ages, as its last appearance dated back to over 4,200 years ago, when many of the ancient Egyptian pyramids were still new. The comet, which would remain visible in the Northern Hemisphere for 18 months straight between 1996 and 1997, surpassed the streak of the Great Comet of 1811.

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Anxious to join Nettles on the Next Level, in October 1996, Applewhite and his 38 disciples (21 women and 17 men) secured a lease for a sprawling three-story, seven-bedroom, Mediterranean-style hilltop mansion measuring 9,200 square feet in Rancho Santa Fe, California, which would set them back a staggering $7,000 each month. On November 15, another vital element of the grand plan, their date of departure, took shape when Applewhite learned that an amateur photographer had captured a cryptic entity – an actual unidentified flying object – tagging along behind the comet. This mysterious object, Applewhite concluded, had to be the heaven-sent spaceship that they had prophesied, and it was coming to collect their souls.

The crew spent the following months meticulously preparing for their final exit, which was scheduled for the week that the comet was due to be closest to Earth. They purchased massive quantities of powdered barbiturates from Mexico, as well as 39 pairs of Nike '93 Decades, a plain black-and-white sneaker from the budget line, their only significance being its cheap $10 price tag. They also commissioned a fresh set of identical, specially designed uniforms: sleek, all-black collared jumpsuits, which they would wear on their literal self-made deathbeds. Triangular patches embroidered with the words “Heaven's Gate Away Team,” set against a backdrop of shooting stars and a radiant sun burst, were sewn to each sleeve, a deliberate reference to Captain Kirk's exploration team. The week prior to the departure, the team recorded their farewell videos, and Applewhite's manifesto was videotaped separately.

At around 2:00 p.m. on March 21, 1997, the crew's last day on Earth, Applewhite and his 38 disciples filed into the Carlsbad branch of the Marie Callender's restaurant chain, where the group would have their celebratory last supper. Everyone in the party ordered the same meal – a large turkey pot pie, which they enjoyed with a blueberry cheesecake and an iced tea – which was noticeably more indulgent than the cult's traditional diet. Later that evening, the Heaven's Gate website was updated with an animated, flashing “Red Alert” graphic, along with the following message: “Hale-Bopp brings closure to Heaven's Gate...[The comet's] arrival is joyously very significant to us at 'Heaven's Gate.' The joy is that our Older Member in the Evolutionary Level Above Human...has made it clear to us that Hale-Bopp's

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approach is the 'marker' we've been waiting for – the time for the arrival of the spacecraft from the Level Above Human to take us home to 'Their World' – in the literal Heavens. Our 22 years of classroom here on planet Earth is finally coming to conclusion – 'graduation' from the Human Evolutionary Level. We are happily prepared to leave 'this world' and go with Ti's crew."

Over the next three days, members of the cult took turns laying themselves to eternal sleep, with 15 killing themselves the first day, another 15 the next day, and the remaining nine on the third day. Those scheduled to depart on the first shift consumed either vodka, pudding, or applesauce laced with lethal doses of phenobarbital and hydrocodone (the latter an opioid typically used for pain management), inserted their heads in tightly sealed plastic bags, and reclined themselves on their assigned beds. Those due to make their exit on the second day would then tidy up after their departed comrades before repeating the process. Applewhite, the last man standing, made one final sweep across the mansion, checking the pulses of his disciples to ensure that their souls had fully exited their vehicles. Only then did he lay himself to rest in the master bedroom.

A nominal member of the cult, Rio DiAngelo, hastened over to the mansion on March 26 as instructed by the letter he received in the mail that morning, and he reported the heartbreaking incident to the relevant authorities. The lifeless bodies of the cult members, which had entered the first stages of decomposition, were found laid out on their adjacent bunk beds. Squares of cloth in varying shades of violet were draped over their heads and upper torsos, so that only their black pants and Nike Decades were visible. Precisely $5.75 in identical bills and coins were found in each one of their pockets.

One might presume that their deaths, while pitiful and acutely distressing, were relatively peaceful, but the blood spatters on the walls and the pools of urine that stained the carpets suggest otherwise. A number of seemingly unused shotguns, rifles, and other assault weapons were apparently located in two sheds within the compound shortly afterwards. Given that there were no survivors, there was no way to determine the exact chain of events that took place in the residence.

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In the wake of the mass suicide, it did not take long for America and the rest of the world to make a mockery out of Heaven's Gate members. *Saturday Night Live* aired a segment wherein a Nike symbol and the company's famous slogan, "Just do it," was superimposed onto actual photographs of the dead cult members just two weeks after the event. Even to this day, it is not uncommon to see "edgy" youths in homemade Heaven's Gate costumes for Halloween. All of that obscured the actual human cost of the event, and that the cult's members still deserve some common decency:

Dana Tracey Abreo, 35

Marshall Herff Applewhite, 66

Robert John Arancio, 46

Raymond Alan Bowers, 46

Ladonna Ann Brugato, 40

Margaret June Bull, 53

Cheryl Elaine Butcher, 42

Michael Howard Carrier, 48

Suzanne Sylvia Cooke, 54

Wayne "Nick" Cooke, 54

John M. Craig, 63

Betty Eldrie Deal, 64

Erika Ernst, 40

Alphonzo Foster, 44

Charles Humphrey, 56

Darwin Lee Johnson, 42

Jacqueline Opal Leonard, 72

Jeffrey Howard Lewis, 41

Gail Renee Maeder, 28

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Steven Terry McCarter, 41

Joel Peter McCormick, 29

Yvonne McCurdy-Hill, 39

Julie LaMontagne, 45

David Geoffrey Moore, 41

Nancy Dianne Nelson, 45

Norma Jeane Nelson, 59

Thomas Alva Nichols, 59

Susan Elizabeth Nora Paup, 54

Lindley Ayerhart Pease, 41

Lucy Eva Pesho, 63

Margaret Ella Richter, 46

Judith Rowland, 50

Michael Barr Sandoe, 25

Brian Alan Schaaf, 40

Joyce Angela Skalla, 58

Gary Jordan St. Louis, 44

Susan Frances Strom, 44

Denise June Thurman, 44

David Cabot van Sinderen 48

Gordon Welch, 50

Sadly, the mass suicide was not the end of the horrific and tragic tale. 54-year-old Wayne Cook, the husband of the one of the deceased members, Suzanne Cooke, was despondent over his failure to join the crew in their final exit. On May 7, his corpse was found at the Holiday Inn Express on Leucadia Boulevard in Encinitas, about five miles away from the Rancho

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Santa Fe mansion. Cooke's companion, 56-year-old Charles Humphrey, who was laying alongside him, was found with a faint pulse and was subsequently revived at Scripps Memorial Hospital. The pair had attempted to mimic the crew's suicide methods, which had been publicized by the media, down to the last detail. They, too, were dressed in black slacks and Nike Decades, ingested a cocktail of vodka and barbiturates, and were each found with a $5 bill and three quarters in their pockets.

In a Heaven's Gate documentary produced by *History TV* that aired a few months later, Humphrey ruefully reflected on the crew's mass departure and made no mention of his unsuccessful suicide attempt. “I was so happy to hear that they were finally off this planet,” said Humphrey. “I just wish that I was with them at that moment.” Humphrey's dead body was discovered in a tent in the Arizona desert on February 21, 1998. He had slipped a plastic bag over his head and stuffed it with pipes connected to his car's exhaust pipe, as well as a tank labeled “carbon dioxide.”

On November 22, 1999, the cult members' uniforms, shoes, and other personal effects were put up for bidding at a local auction. Profits generated by the curator of Los Angeles' Museum of Death and collectors of morbid memorabilia amounted to $32,707, part of which was used to cover the auction's costs. The rest was divvied up among the deceased's surviving family members. Nike immediately discontinued production of the '93 Decades for obvious reasons, but demand for that particular line of shoes skyrocketed, and they are now regarded as rare, limited-edition collector items. Today, buyers can typically find a pair of '93 Nike Decades listed on *eBay* at a starting bid of $6,660. The Rancho Santa Fe mansion, now referred to as the “Hale-Bopp House,” still remains on the market, but its value dropped precipitously, going from its original $1.6 million to $668,000.

Incredibly, the cult, while a mere whisper of what it was in its heyday, still exists. Its official website is still in operation, supposedly run by a surviving member who calls himself “Telah,” and it bears the exact same design – a chilling time capsule featuring outdated graphics, animations, and a fixed, pixelated background of twinkling stars, with a link to purchase a hard copy of their book. Other members, in addition to responding to emails, have taken to keeping the cause alive via more modern forms of social media. One member, Sawyer, currently runs a blog entitled “Sawyer Stands for Ti &

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Do's Heaven's Gate" and actively posts on and livestreams from his Twitter account under the handle "SawyerDoTi."

Online Resources

Other 20th century history titles by Charles River Editors

Other titles about the Peoples Temple on Amazon

Other titles about Waco on Amazon

Other titles about Heaven's Gate on Amazon

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